

**no sense of living
without aim**

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Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Codependency, Developing Relationship, Eddie Kaspbrak Lives, Friends With Benefits, Getting Together, Grindr AU, Hook-Up, M/M, Meeting Before Derry, Post-IT (2017), Pre-IT Chapter Two (2019), Repressed Memories, Slow Burn, Smut, how many Pretty Woman references can I fit in one single fic challenge

Language: English

Characters: Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-10-19

Updated: 2019-11-26

Packaged: 2019-12-19 15:51:28

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 5

Words: 36,029

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Eddie had been on Grindr for all of two days when he met Richie Tozier, even though the name wouldn't have told him anything at the time.

Or: pre-Chapter 2. Sometimes your long-lost childhood crush is the anonymous hook-up you meet along the way.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Title is from ABBA's *The Day Before You Came*

The first time Eddie kissed another man, he was tipsy.

Not drunk, not quite yet, but pleasantly buzzed and well on his way to getting there, even though he really shouldn't mix alcohol with his meds, Eddie, dear, as Myra sometimes reminded him. She had a way of making him feel guilty about the smallest things – driving too fast, laughing at an off-colour joke, having a little too much booze at a client lunch instead of sticking with his half glass of white. She never told him outright when something disappointed her, but she'd purse her lips and sniffle quietly and turn her head away when he went to kiss her on the cheek.

"Well, I'm going then," he said, fiddling with his jacket buttons. Myra hummed but didn't speak; Eddie's third-best pair of shoes clicked loudly against the floor as he went to get his keys, making perhaps more noise than he had to.

"I'll be taking a taxi." He said it like a challenge: *I'll be drinking some more, just because you told me not to, and you can't stop me.* It was childish, and it felt good. "Don't wait up."

He strode into the street, nearly running, feeling an itch under his skin he couldn't seem to get rid of. He rode his restlessness back into Manhattan, in a crowded reception all with flower decorations and a truly excellent open bar. It was a retirement party for the partner of a client, and Eddie knew maybe two dozen people there, most of them not very well. He found that he liked the relative anonymity; he shook hands and laughed too loudly at stale jokes, and no one tried to make small talk or asked him why he'd left his wife at home.

The man's name was Jonathan, and he was a lawyer; he was tall and wiry, with a loud laugh that had attracted Eddie's attention across the room. He was unabashedly loud and the corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled, and it took Eddie two drinks to realise he

was flirting with him. A third drink and he was flirting back because he liked the warm feeling of it, the fast-paced banter, the way he looked at him like Eddie was someone interesting.

At some point, he found himself on a balcony, with little idea of how he'd gotten there. It was June and impossibly hot, bright lights spilling into the night, and Jonathan's mouth tasted like whiskey and euphoria. There was stubble on his cheeks, scratching lightly at the corner of Eddie's lips, and the feeling of it set off a spark inside of him and Eddie thought – *Oh*. He pulled back, breathless, hands shaking. He found that he liked that he was kissing somebody taller, the feeling of large hands pushing his shoulders against the wall. The air cracked with something like electricity, and his head spun.

Oh, Eddie thought, again, and his cock twitched in his pinstriped slacks with an enthusiasm that felt years overdue.

When he went home he jerked off in the shower, which should've felt sad and pathetic but somehow he was too wired to care. He pressed his naked back to the wet tiles and fantasised that someone else was pressing him there, someone taller and broader and decidedly *male* — he breathed in the fragrance of his pine-scented shower gel and thought about the shower stalls in his gym's locker rooms, glimpses of thighs and asses, and shivered under the hot spray as he came.

Fuck, Eddie thought, dazed and shaking. *Fuck, fuck*— and then, hysterically, he wondered if from now on the smell of his shower gel would give him a boner.

He brushed his teeth and went to sleep, and in the morning he told Myra that he had a headache and perhaps she'd been right about the drinking, but she knew how dull those work events could get. She smiled indulgently and said she'd make him eggs for breakfast, and Eddie sat up in bed and touched the palm of his hand to his tingling lips, chasing the ghost of a touch.

Eddie Kaspbrak was thirty-six years old, and he'd made great

progress on paying off his mortgage. He'd recently been promoted at work, he never took days off, and he was thinking about buying a new car.

All in all, Eddie figured, he was just about due for a midlife crisis.

Thinking back, he couldn't believe he'd never *realised*. He and Myra had been married six years; they had sex about once a month and he'd always thought that was just fine — not often, sure, but Eddie had never thought of himself as a particularly sexual person, at least not before he started jerking off thinking about Dave from Compliance.

These days, it was as if the floodgates had opened. He was horny *all the time*, and restless, and that gave way to a habit of cruising on Friday nights in a series of increasingly dirtier bars he usually wouldn't be caught dead at, all in the name of Finding Himself, and so forth. Eddie thought of it as window shopping — he'd stare, a lot, and try to figure out what got his dick interested. Sometimes men bought him drinks. Sometimes they flirted and that got him to flirt back, outrageously, like a man ten years younger, dizzy on newfound desires and cheap beer.

The second time he kissed a man it was in an alley not ten feet away from a garbage dumpster, and the worst thing was that he was so turned on he didn't even care. Was this how teenagers felt like all the time? Not that Eddie would know — his childhood memories were spotty at best — and he soon repressed that avenue of thought in favour of licking into the mouth of... Juan? Jose? Someone with a J, anyway, and a wicked smile, and long thin fingers that stroked the side of Eddie's chin as he sucked on Eddie's lip, and then his other hand slipped under the waistband of Eddie's slacks and *holy shit*—

He moaned into the kiss. There was a hand on Eddie's dick, a hand not his own, warm and broad — a man's hand, gripping him maybe a bit too tight, jacking him off in time with the slide of his tongue into maybe-Juan's mouth, his breath rough in Eddie's ear. It felt like a revelation.

And Eddie could touch, too, he remembered, and so he wasted no time in pushing Juan's tacky pink shirt away from the front of his

pants, shoving them open. He sighed against Juan's neck and bucked his hips into the touch, his cock swollen and leaking. Eddie spared a half-thought for the load of laundry he'd have to do when he got home, and then decided he didn't care because maybe-Juan's dick was in his hand, large and wet, and it *twitched* in the grip of Eddie's fingers, and Eddie felt his mouth water. He thought about putting his mouth there, and swallowed. He thought about fucking—he shuddered, half-sobbing into the kiss, and then he was coming in a stranger's hand in a pitch-dark alley, and somehow no sex he'd had in his life had felt this good.

That was it for finding himself, then. Whoever the real Eddie Kaspbrak was, maybe he'd been hiding behind a dumpster in Brooklyn all this time, getting progressively hornier. It was time to deal with it.

Eddie's third-ever kiss with a man was with Richie Tozier, even though the name wouldn't have told him anything at the time.

He'd been on Grindr for all of two days, freshly separated and clear of conscience, and in the past forty-odd hours he'd already seen more dicks than he had in the nearly forty years of his life. He'd gone methodically through his messages and blocked all the catfishes, the possible serial killers and the bores, and spent some time puzzling over the weird collection of humanity on his phone. He nervously avoided a message from an Adonis-looking redhead who was far too hot to even look at Eddie twice, and eventually settled on a promising '*37. DTF. I'll mix u a drink after*' (637 feet away).

There was no name, only a string of emojis. Eddie's profile said 'Ed', because no one in his life called him ever, and he'd uploaded a deeply boring chest picture and a more flattering one that must have been taken at the gym, his shirt sliding up to show his abs from the side, waistband dripping low. This guy also had no pictures of his face, but there was one of his back — broad shoulders, lightly muscled, bathed in a soft morning glow — that made Eddie's mouth water.

Sitting at his desk on his lunch break, Eddie tried to look casual as he typed slowly,

>> *What do you like?*

The reply came nearly immediately,

<< *im easy to please*

Eddie felt a bright wave of heat rush up his face in the middle of the office floor. He coughed, discreetly, and drank a gulp of water. Then he turned his attention back to his phone.

>> *I meant what kind of drink would you make me*

He paused,

>> *But good to know*

A brief pause. Then,

<< *fuck me if i know buddy i have a mini bar. or we can get room service*

Eddie breathed in sharply. Was this is then? He hadn't thought it could be so easy.

>> *I get off work at 6*

<< *sweet. i can get u off again by 7*

That was *awful*, Eddie thought. Corny. But it drew a startled laugh out of him all the time, and he found himself grinning down at the screen, feeling just a bit out of his depth.

>> *Sure ...*

<< *oh im very determined babe*

An address followed — a hotel, right off Bryant Park, and a room number.

<< *6 30 ok for you?*

Eddie bit on his lip.

>> *I 'm sending this to my friend in case I turn up missing*

That was a lie. He was going to leave the address somewhere easy to spot, just in case, but the idea of telling his real-life acquaintances about his gay hook-ups was still too much to face.

<< *ofc. dont worry ive never murdered anybody before*

A short pause

<< *hey ed*

For some reason, the message startled him. It *was* the name he'd put on his profile, specifically because no one around him used it, but he felt something go tight in his chest, and he didn't... Eddie shook his head. He typed out a reply,

>> *yeah?*

<< *want to see what ur getting later*

Eddie could *feel* his face going red. Flaming. Probably scarlet. He thought—

>> *I 'm at work*

<< *thats not a no*

It wasn't. Eddie licked his lips, thinking of a reply, and that was when the screen blinked at him again.

<< *shit gotta go. see you later hopefully?*

His treacherous fingers danced on the keys, almost out of their own will. He hit SEND.

>> *If you send me a pic I 'll find somewhere quiet to look at it*

Then he put his phone away, and tried to focus on his work projections.

By the time six o'clock rolled around Eddie had valiantly managed *not* to jerk off in a bathroom stall at work to a dick pic from his soon-to-be hook-up, simply because that would be disgusting and he had more self-control than that. But he'd wanted to, so bad that he could almost taste it, so instead he'd washed his face with cold water and turned his attention to cold hard statistics that had a way to damper even the horniest of moods. But he was itching, nervous and excited at the same time, and as soon as he shut down his computer for the day he sprung to his feet and stuffed his silk tie his jacket pocket.

He decided to walk to the hotel, feeling more and more unsettled with every step. It was a fancy place, and large, the kind of hotel that hosted corporate dinners and wedding receptions and where the staff didn't bother to check comings and goings during the daytime, which was just as well because Eddie wouldn't have known how to begin to explain it. He didn't even know the guy's *name*, he thought, and then he had a small freakout in the elevator wondering what the fuck he thought he was doing.

But he was *here*, so close, and the thought of turning on his heels and going back home to an empty bed too much to stand. He clenched his jaw, took a deep breath, and knocked on the door marked 628.

Once, then again.

“Coming!” a voice said. It was a man, and very cheerful — the voice of someone who has good reasons to believe he’s about to get laid.

The door opened a few inches, just enough to catch an impression of dark hair and a nice jaw.

“Hello,” the guy said, and there was something in his tone that made clear that he very much liked what he saw. Eddie felt a flush creeping up his neck. “Listen, before I say anything else, are you Ed, thirty-six, *et cetera*? Else, this has the potential to get pretty awkward.”

“Depends,” Eddie said. “How many people are you waiting for to

show up? I didn't sign up for a fucking orgy."

The man laughed, a warm sound that did something strange to Eddie's insides. "Now that's a thought. Come on in," he said. "Now, do you really want that drink right now or are more of a booze after sex kind of guy?"

Eddie looked around. The room was bigger than what he'd expected — a small suite, really, with a living area and the shape of something that might have been a desk, and a bedroom beyond that. It was dark, with only a weak light filtering through from the bedroom, and Eddie could barely make out the features of the man in front of him. The curve of his lips, his height, his shoulders. He swallowed.

"I got your pic," Eddie said, slowly, in a voice that was too deep to sound like his own.

The man moved in closer. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

They were chest to chest, and when the man laughed again Eddie felt the tickle of it against his face. A warm hand came up to caress the side of Eddie's jaw.

"You're welcome," he said. "So that's a yes to sex first, right?" And then he leaned in, and kissed Eddie on the mouth.

Eddie's third-ever kiss with a man was the best kiss of his life so far.

It wasn't the smoothest. He was tense, sweating under his shirt and suit jacket, but there was *something* about the feeling of their lips pressed together, the shape of this body pressed against his own.

There was stubble on the man's face, and that really shouldn't have felt as good as it when he scratched lightly against Eddie's neck, making him squirm. When he kissed down his jaw Eddie melted into it in a way that was frankly embarrassing, breath hitching with every hot press of the man's lips against his neck.

"Shit, you're loud," he whispered, and Eddie felt his face grow warm. "That's hot."

There were hands on his shoulders, pushing off his jacket — and it would crease like that, wrinkling on the floor, but Eddie couldn't find it within himself to care. His shirt went next, and Eddie shivered as the man ran his hands up Eddie's sides to his chest, over his arms, leaning down to press a kiss to Eddie's shoulder that was all teeth.

"You're hot," he said, again, and Eddie thought he might melt. He grabbed the man's face between his hands and tugged him close to kiss him on the mouth again, open-mouthed and sloppy, then shoved his thigh between the man's legs to press up against his hardening cock and felt him inhale sharply into the kiss.

When Eddie pulled back he felt like he could barely breathe. In the dim light he saw the man lick his lips.

"Can I blow you?"

Eddie's head was *spinning*, as if somebody hit him. He blinked, slightly stunned, and it took him a moment or two to bring himself under control.

"Yeah," he croaked. "Yeah I'm— sure. Go ahead."

"Sure," the man echoed. There was something smug radiating off him, and Eddie supposed it was his own damn fault, what with the way he'd been — *mewling* and making stupid noises just because the guy who'd kissed him was tall and couldn't be bothered to shave. He should get himself under control, but his breath was rough and his dick stupidly hard and Eddie realised that he really didn't want to.

"Well, bed's that way," the man said. "Lose the pants?"

Eddie's chinos were Ralph Lauren and should really be hung up in a closet, or at the very least draped gently over the back of a chair, but he just left them on the floor on his way to the bedroom. Every inch of his skin burned with a strange heat, a need to be touched. He felt exposed, strangely adrift.

"Come here," he said. "Here. I want..."

He sighed when the man kissed him again, wrapping his hands around the back of his neck and letting himself be pushed gently to

the bed, laying down over cold sheets. There was more light in here, not enough to see details but good enough to get a good idea. Eddie craned his neck in time to see the man crawling up between his legs, and then he wrapped his hands around Eddie's cock and he had to bite down sharply on another undignified noise.

"Don't be like that, babe," the man said, amused. "I wanna hear you." And then he stroked Eddie's cock with a perfect grip and flicked his wrist in a way that should have been illegal, and Eddie just couldn't help the moan that escaped him then. The man laughed again. "See?"

Eddie felt a sudden urge to flip him off. "Just so we're clear," he said instead, "if you put your mouth on my dick without a condom I'm not kissing you after."

"Woah, you're prissy," the guy said. "Whatever, Julia Roberts." And then he bent his head and *did* put Eddie's cock in his mouth, and Eddie's brain went offline for a while.

It was—not quite like seeing stars behind his eyes, but close. Like a religious experience, except gayer, and some distant part of Eddie's mind was baffled and outraged that he'd made it through thirty-six years of life without ever getting his dick sucked, and clearly that was all college Eddie's fault for passing on it when he'd had the chance, and to think that he could have been getting blown this entire time.

It was just—*good*. The feeling of a hot mouth sucking on the head of his dick, the matching slow strokes of the man's hand, the thing he was doing with his tongue. It wasn't a very showy blowjob; the guy didn't take him all in, or even come close to trying, but it was a good thing because Eddie didn't think he would have survived anything more, not now. He was barely clinging to the last shreds of his dignity as it was, bucking his hips off the mattress at the feeling of wet heat, those slow maddening strokes.

When the man pulled away, he might have whined.

"You're all right there?" He sounded so fucking smug, and Eddie raised his head to glare weakly. "I can always stop if it's too—"

“Don’t,” Eddie said. He reached out to slap the guy on the shoulder, lightly, and heard him laugh. “Keep going,” he said, in a voice that surprised even himself, heavy and charged with *something*, and he felt the man shiver between his thighs.

“Right,” he said, in a much different way, and then he did get back to it, and Eddie really was too distracted after that.

He didn’t last long, which certainly didn’t come as a surprise to either of them, coming with a groan down the man’s throat, and that was just *filthy* — it should have been disgusting, that he’d swallowed, but something about it made Eddie shiver. He crawled up the length of Eddie’s body, warm hands brushing comfortingly over his arms and shoulders when they’d just pinned his hips into the mattress twenty seconds ago, and both Eddie’s brain and his spent dick were too tired to make sense out of all the emotions he was feeling.

“Everything good?” the man asked, voice surprisingly soft. He pressed a kiss to the hollow of Eddie’s jaw, drawing another of those embarrassing noises.

“Yeah, I’m— I’m good,” Eddie said. “I just— need to catch my breath.” He shifted over the sheets so that they were pressed together from hip to shoulder, and he could feel the man’s hard dick brushing wetly against his hip. “Sorry,” he added, feeling slightly stupid and kind of useless.

The man’s chest rumbled when he laughed. “Are you kidding? Like, this whole evening is actually doing wonders for my ego, you have no idea—”

Eddie snorted. “I mean, I don’t feel like your ego needs any stroking,” he said, and then groaned as soon as his brain caught up with his mouth. “Don’t say it.”

“Well—”

“Don’t,” Eddie warned, but he reached out anyway and wrapped his fingers around the man’s cock, enjoying the feeling of it filling up in his hand. He pressed the pad of his thumb over the slit, pushing slightly into it, and heard a deep moan.

“Were you actually serious about the no kissing thing, because I really, really want—”

Eddie kissed him. It did taste bad, admittedly, but there was also something stupidly hot about it and he found himself moaning into the kiss, chasing the bitter taste of his own come, short of breath and hot all over. *Filthy*, he thought, and then he did it again.

“You know I really— *shit*,” the man said, making a very gratifying sound against Eddie’s lips. “I really wanted to fuck you but I don’t think I’m going to last.”

Oh. It would have been a lie to say Eddie hadn’t thought about it — in fact he’d marched into this room determined to get as many of his checkboxes ticked off as he could, but then his anonymous hookup had turned out to be stupidly overwhelming, and now he didn’t really want to move. “I could stop,” he offered, letting his hand fall still around the man’s wet cock.

“Don’t you dare.” He mouthed the words over the pulse point of Eddie’s neck. “I’m in town all week, you know. In case.”

Oh. “I’ll think about it,” said Eddie, coyly — and that was a word he’d never thought would apply to him in *his life* — and then he shifted around and pushed the man with his shoulder into the mattress to keep him in place while Eddie jacked him off methodically and mercilessly, like he’d done to himself in the shower night after night for months. Some part of him still couldn’t believe he got to have this — good sex, uncomplicated, just because he wanted to — and he found himself laughing, giddy, leaning down to crush his lips against the man’s mouth.

“Fuck,” he heard him whisper. “Fuck you’re so—”

But whatever else Eddie might be he never found out, because the man shuddered as he came underneath him, heavy cock spilling in Eddie’s hand, drops hitting his hip and thigh. That was far from ideal, though he was still too turned on to feel anything but very vague distaste at the mess.

It was easy to get distracted, getting kissed again and again, lazy and

soft, and it was only when he started to feel kind of tired and really disgusting that Eddie disentangled himself slowly, making noises about needing to wash up.

In the bathroom, he stared at himself in the mirror. Same face, looking maybe a bit more smug. Same eyes, same body. But he felt as if something monumental had changed.

“Grab a towel while you’re at it, will you?” He heard from the bedroom. “I’ll just put it on the bed.”

Eddie did as instructed, feeling some sympathy for the hotel staff that’d have to change the sheets in the morning. Being naked felt strange now, a bit awkward, and kind of cold.

“Do you, uhm. Do you want something to drink? I got Prosecco,” the man said, holding a bottle in one outstretched hand and no glasses in the other. “It came with the room.”

Eddie frowned. “Did you drink from the bottle? Because that’s kind of —”

“Dude, I literally had your dick in my mouth just now.” Eddie felt his face burn, suddenly grateful for the darkness of the room.

“Just take it.”

“Fine,” Eddie said. He took the offered bottle and yeah, it was good. He drank another gulp, then a third.

“Come here.”

He looked up to find the man watching him from the bed. *Siri, is there a right moment to ask the name of the man you just had sex with? Did I just miss the window?* Not that Eddie had introduced himself, either, but at least *his* profile had a name on it. Maybe, if they did end up doing this again...

“Hey, isn’t it cold here?” Eddie blurted out. He saw the outline of what was almost definitely a shrug.

“Just grab a shirt. Over there? I think I put some shit in the drawer,

just take one, I swear they're clean."

Navigating the room meant almost killing himself stumbling on a forgotten suitcase, bottle in hand and everything, and Eddie turned around to glare viciously at the bed. "Can't you turn on another lamp? I almost died on this thing."

"Can't, I'm a vampire," came the reply, which Eddie took as a big fat *no*. He still managed to retrieve a shirt, dark and soft, and threw it on before cursing his way back to the bed.

"Hey, so—" he started to say, before getting muffled with another kiss that was good because it meant they didn't need to talk for a while. It was really stupidly good, period, and they took turns passing the bottle back and forth and lazily making out, and it felt almost too good to be true.

By the time the bottle was empty Eddie felt himself getting tired, heavy and loose-limbed in a way that was too pleasant to do anything about it. In a moment, he thought, five minutes and he'd get up and get dressed and drive himself home.

"Just ten minutes," he tried to say, and he thought maybe he'd heard a reply, but he may have just been dreaming it.

It was his stomach that woke him up, really. Eddie was hungry — he hadn't had dinner yesterday, thought he'd grab something on the way home but then he'd fallen asleep, and...

"Fuck," he said, standing up. He was still in the hotel room, lying entangled with the man from last night, and now it was... "Shit. Where's my phone?"

Probably in the other room, with the rest of his clothes. He jumped out of the bed, hearing a soft noise of protest as he went, and tried to find his discarded clothes. Socks, chinos, underwear. Shirt. He threw it on, buttoning it up quickly. Jacket — and inside it was his phone, with 21% battery and no missed calls. The screen said 4:39 AM.

Could have been worse. Not enough time to drive back home, but enough to grab a shower at the gym and change at the office before anyone came in. His stomach grumbled. And maybe breakfast on the way. And coffee — his mouth tasted like something had died in it.

“Hey.” Eddie jumped in the middle of tying his shoe, before realising that of course it was the guy from last night. It *was* his damn hotel room.

“Hey, I— I really have to go,” he said, quickly. “I have work in like, three hours. But, uhm. I had a really good time?” Was that something you said to your sleepy unnamed one-night-stand who probably wanted nothing more to go back the fuck to sleep? Probably not.

“I’m around?” he said. “I mean, if you want. Now I really gotta— goodnight. Morning. Bye.”

And he left, feeling much more awkward than he had since he’d first walked in.

Eddie kept the shirt. It definitely hadn’t been on purpose — he’d dressed in a rush in a dark room, half asleep, throwing his clothes on haphazardly and it was a miracle he’d even found his socks at all, and so Eddie didn’t really realise it until he undressed again to shower. By then it was five-thirty and he *still* hadn’t gotten anything to eat, so he just threw it to the bottom of his gym bag and didn’t really look at it until he got home.

Later that evening, he took it out of the bag and laid it out gently on his bed. It was a rusty red colour, well-worn and soft, slightly too large for Eddie’s frame. And in the back, in big gold lettering, it said ‘R. TOZIER’.

Something inside Eddie’s chest clenched. It was an odd feeling, tight and uncomfortable, and didn’t seem to go away no matter how many glasses of water he drank.

That night, his sleep was restless and uncomfortable.

Notes for the Chapter:

Turns out it's really hard to write a third person sex scene when your POV character doesn't know the name of the person he's hooking up with. I'm highkey excited to move on to smut with two named characters in the next chapter.

2. Chapter 2

It took Eddie all of two days to google Richie Tozier, mostly because every time he thought about it too hard he felt queasy in a strange way that he couldn't quite put into words. There was *something* there, something important, that left him torn between the desire to remember and the urge to run away as fast as he could.

So, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of green tea on hand, he pulled up the Google search bar and typed, slowly, 'R. Tozier'.

There was a Twitter account, an IMDB page, and a series of articles going down the page. The preview for the Wikipedia article said '*Richard 'Richie' Tozier (born March 7th, 1976) is an American stand-up comedian, writer and voice actor...*'. It set off faint recognition bells in Eddie's mind, and he opened the page to a new tab.

He went through the image search and, well. It matched. Eddie might not have recognised they guy if they'd passed each other on the street three weeks from now, but the memory of the other night was still fresh in his mind. He scrolled through the dozen of pictures and recognised the features he'd mapped with his fingertips, traced with his lips and his tongue.

On impulse, he clicked to the 'Personal Life' section of the Wikipedia page. It was very bare: he lived in Los Angeles, had participated to a popular celebrity charity initiative in 2010, and before then there had been persistent rumours linking him to a female co-star from an animated feature, which neither had addressed.

Well, then. Eddie drummed his fingers on the table. He felt an itch to know more — he thought about reading further, checking out a headline or two, opening the pages of the linked projects. Instead, he took his phone out and opened Grindr.

He'd spent all of yesterday thinking about messaging almost-definitely-Richie-Tozier — wasn't that good hook-up etiquette? '*Hey, I just wanted to say, thank you for the dick*'. But he hadn't, and then he'd woken up that morning and felt like it was too late.

Now he wrote,

>> *you still in town?*

Then he put the phone back in his pocket, and got up to go to work.

That morning he made it through a very boring meeting and a spent his lunch hour reviewing for a much less boring but considerably more stressful presentation in the afternoon. After work he went to the gym — a habit he'd picked up a few years ago, when he'd first decided that six was too early to go back home — and then to a bar in the Village with some of the guys from the office, where Jack from two desks over punched him in the shoulder and said that he was looking much better.

“Separation going well man?” he said, and he winked. “Ready to get back in the game?”

“Kind of,” Eddie said, shrugging, which reminded him. He turned the conversation around and as soon as he could he excused himself to the restroom to check his phone.

He had a handful of messages — three or four spam bots, a very crass opening that probably wasn’t worth his time, another crass opening that actually looked promising. And then there was Richie from Tuesday night.

<< *here til monday*

<< *wanna meet up*

<< *im not above begging*

Eddie licked his lips, feeling the rush of sensory memory and the sudden urge of want.

>> *tomorrow works for you?*

Once again, the reply was near immediate. Closeted or not, clearly Richie Tozier didn’t need to worry about the people around him peeking over his shoulder while he checked private messages on a gay hook-up app.

<< *cant. i get back in really late*

<< *what about saturday afternoon*

Saturday afternoons for the last seven years had been spent with Myra, going grocery shopping for the week and visiting department stores, sometimes doing thing with her friends or going out for dinner.

These days he spent his Saturdays driving aimlessly around the county, parking near a different park every week with his running shoes in the backseat. He had shitty form and he knew it, launching himself into it until his legs could hardly support his weight and his lungs burned like the ghost of an asthma attack. He always ended up nearly folded in two at the side of the path, breathing in greedily, using an inhaler he knew he didn't actually need, and on the way home he bought himself a greasy pizza that completely annihilated whatever health benefits he'd just accrued, but it hardly mattered because he spent the rest of the week eating perfectly balanced meals. Rinse, repeat.

So, yeah, he could make time on Saturday.

>> *works for me*

<< *nice*

What kind of grown man said *nice*, Eddie thought, and then it sank in that they were going to meet again in less than two days, and he started fantasising about getting said man to blow him again.

He shot a couple messages to other guys on the app — diversifying his portfolio, and all that — but his thoughts kept circling back to the other night and his plans for Saturday with a single-minded intensity that took him by surprise. He choreographed the encounter in his mind and laid out an outfit that'd probably end up rumpled on the floor within five minutes of his walking inside. He washed and folded Richie's shirt and put it in a plastic bag.

On Friday night he fought down the urge to look up Richie Tozier again, maybe on Youtube, maybe reading through his IMDB page, a

strange impulse that made him feel like a creep. He closed the screen on his laptop and sat on his bed, chest tight and breath coming in shallow, feeling antsy and not really knowing why.

By the time Saturday arrived, Eddie thought he would jump out of his fucking skin. He showed up at three, which was kind of early, holding up the plastic bag in front of his chest like a shield.

“I have your shirt,” he said, handing it over like it was a bottle of fancy French wine to a dinner party at his boss’s house.

“Oh, thanks.” The bag was picked up from his arms with much less care and thrown somewhere across the room, as if Eddie hadn’t ironed the fuck out of those wrinkles with his own hands just that morning. Then Eddie found himself crowded against the door, a warm mouth at his neck.

“You know, your dorky polo’s really doing it for me.” A kiss under his jaw, and Eddie shivered. “Take it off?”

The room was dim, their bodies cast in shadows, and Eddie thought that maybe not coming clean now would be kind of a dick move. Not that it usually stopped him — Eddie *was* a dick and keenly aware of it, short-tempered and foul-mouthed and a nightmare to customer service workers everywhere — but maybe this was the moment to actually be a decent human being.

“Wait, wait—”

“What?” It came out in a breath against his neck. Reluctantly, Eddie put some space between them.

“Look, I should tell you...”

“Do you have herpes, because you should really have said—”

“Do I have *what?*” Eddie shook his head. “No, it’s, uh. I looked you up online.”

“Shit,” Richie Tozier said. He stepped away. “Well. Whatever, man.” There was a pause. “I mean, what do you want me to say?”

“Listen, it wasn’t like I *planned* it. It just happened!”

Then, realising that he was being unnecessarily dickish, and also really reducing his chance to get laid, Eddie cleared his throat. “Look, I — I mean, it’s not the same thing, but I work for a big insurance firm. I wouldn’t want people who know me professionally to see my Grindr chest pictures, you know?”

There was a snort. “But there’s such pretty pictures.”

Eddie felt himself flush.

“Anyway. I’m Eddie? I mean, you kinda knew that, but.” He held out his hand.

“Oh my god, you want to shake hands? That’s *adorable*.” It hadn’t been the reaction Eddie had expected; he felt a bit like an idiot standing there, with his arm awkwardly outstretched.

“Dude, we had sex, it’s kind of cute that you—” He shook his head, snorting a burst of laughter. “I’m Richie, but we established that already. Wow, I feel like I’m at Homosexual Anonymous. Hi.”

Eddie fought the urge to turn his hand into a punch to the face. Venomously, he asked, “Has anyone ever told you that you’re a dick?”

“Couple of times.”

“I mean, you had a shirt with your name on it, what kind of asshole does that? Is that like, the comedy version of a letterman jacket?”

“Yeah, actually. It was… I think someone gave it to me for one of those cheesy late-night show challenges? Like, three legged run, shit like that. I don’t really remember. It’s not like I had it made.”

“I fucking ironed that shirt, by the way,” Eddie said. He thought it was important to explain that. “And you threw it to the floor just now, so thank you for that. Anyway. I just… read your name on it

and I felt like I heard it before, so.” He shrugged.

“I’m flattered,” Richie said, dryly. “I’d have thought you were a bit out of my target audience.”

“You have a target audience?”

“College students and straight male dweebs.” He seemed to perk up. “Hey, does this make me a crossover hit? Next frontier, corporate gaybros.”

“I’m *sorry*, what the fuck did you just call me—” Eddie started to say, voice rising, and then Richie went on.

“Seriously, though. Don’t take this the wrong way, but getting laid in this fucking city is always a disaster.”

“Wow. I mean, I don’t think there’s a right way for me to take that.”

“Oh don’t be a baby.” He’s started to pace across the room, up and down. “It’s just there’s so many *people*— tourists, film students, it makes me nervy, and then I feel stupid for being paranoid and this happens.”

“Hey,” Eddie said, “I’m not going to post your dick pic online, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“*I figured*, just let me have my small freak-out in peace. Whatever. I’m not even really famous, anyway, it’s just—” But he’d stopped pacing, and then he turned to stare at Eddie and said, “Also, why are we still talking when we should be having sex?”

Something pleasant and warm coiled in Eddie’s stomach at the word ‘sex’. His brain took a moment to catch up.

“Wait, so you still want to have sex?”

“Unless you came here just to drop the laundry...” Richie said, and it wasn’t even *funny*, so Eddie grabbed him by the shoulder and kissed him to shut him up. Except that it was dark and he miscalculated the angle, and his open mouth landed wetly on Richie’s jaw.

“It’s like having a puppy lick my face,” he said, and Eddie grabbed a fistful of his hair to tug his face down. “Ouch. Shit, do that again.” His breath was warm against Eddie’s lips and his dick filling up nicely against his hip, so Eddie kissed him again and let himself be dragged to the bedroom.

“Your shirt is so— fucking *stupid*,” said Richie, who’d opened the door in boxers and a bright green tee. He tugged Eddie’s polo above his head and kissed down his stomach— and that was something Eddie was into now, apparently, his dick jerking in anticipation as he thought of the last time that mouth had been on his skin.

“C’mhere.” He was tugged down to Richie’s lap on the bed, and it was a pretty great position to make out in, all rushed kisses and soft moans and dry-humping that wasn’t getting them anywhere for now but it felt *good*.

It seemed to go on forever, and Eddie couldn’t say he minded — there was no rush to get off, just the feeling of a solid body under his own and that pleasant heat pooling down inside of him, the awkward angle of his knee bent into the mattress. The room felt so warm; he was flushed with it, skin tingling with every touch and heart beating loudly in his throat.

“So do you, uh—” Richie placed an open-mouthed kiss between his collarbones and Eddie sucked in a breath between his teeth, felt him shiver at the sound. “What do you want to do? I’m down for whatever.” He pulled back and Eddie stared down at him, mesmerised by the shape of his lips even in the shadows. He pushed his thumb into that mouth, warm and wet.

Richie’s hands were warm on his body, fingers trailing down the curve of his spine, palms cupping his ass firmly as Richie ground his hips up against Eddie’s cock and it was — *a lot*, the red-hot friction, strong fingers digging into his ass through the thin cotton of his underwear.

“Fuck.” He felt a burning hunger like never before — he wanted everything and wanted it *now*, greedy, and he leaned down and sucked the salt on Richie’s neck.

“That’s the idea,” Richie said helpfully into their kiss. “I want...” He groped Eddie’s ass again with his thick fingers and Eddie couldn’t believe how into this he was. Richie groaned. “Or you could give it to me, baby, you *could*— you’d be so good.”

It was like something in Eddie’s brain short-circuited. His mouth felt dry as he thought about— *fucking*, and they were going to, right now. He didn’t know what he wanted; he wanted everything.

He felt like he was floating in his own body, weighted down only by the burning awareness of Richie’s touch — Richie’s hand curled around his biceps, their dicks rubbing together through their underwear like they were fifteen years old and he *couldn’t stop*.

Richie’s voice was rough when he said, “Are you having a moment?”

“Shut up,” he said, immediately. “Shut up, I’m thinking.”

His mind was in overdrive. He thought about fucking Richie and coaxing noises out of his smart mouth and he wanted it so badly he could feel it his damn throat — but his hands were shaking and he thought he’d last about two minutes, wired as he was. Getting fucked sounded easier, less chances to fumble and screw up in his inexperience, but the mere thought made his head dizzy and his skin tingle all over, and he thought he might just die.

He closed his eyes, feeling the frantic heartbeat in his chest, thrusting aimlessly into Richie’s lap in shallow little circles of his hips.

“I’m— uh.”

“I know,” Richie said, encouragingly, warm hand running down his back. “I’m a snack and you can’t decide how you want me. You wouldn’t believe how often that—”

“Please, shut up,” Eddie said, but he was laughing despite himself. He thought about it some more. “Uh, you should fuck me. Also, this was probably the hardest choice of my life.”

"I'm sure," said Richie, theatrically sleazy, and then pushed him down and rolled them over until Eddie found himself on his stomach on the bed, his cock dragging agonisingly over the sheets with every loud pulse of his heart in his fucking throat. He didn't dare to touch himself or he'd just go off right there in the middle of the bed, and it'd be gross and unsanitary and just plain *filthy*— his mouth closed around a desperate sob.

Eddie had fingered himself before. He'd watched more porn in the last two months than he had in his whole life, and it didn't really do much for him but it had certainly be educational. So he'd tried it, but the angle was tricky and he usually got bored halfway through and it had been okay but nothing to write home about— but now he had a warm body pressing him down into the bed and a hot mouth whispering dirty nonsense at his ear and it was *nice*, actually, until the point where they found an angle that really worked and then it was really fucking good.

He felt like he might melt right there, thighs trembling and arousal building up as he panted and sweated and writhed like the star of his very own over the top porn video, three fingers inside of him and shaking uncontrollably with need. He wanted to get fucked and get on with it; he wanted this moment to last forever. He wanted to sob into the fucking pillow.

He made— a *noise*, keening and loud, and Richie breathed in sharply above him pressed a kiss into his shoulder. "Shit that's so *hot*, you're hot. Do it again."

"Maybe if you actually got on with it," Eddie tried to say, just to be a dick, but it was a long sentence you were out of breath so the end came out as a furious '*gtonwidit*'. Richie laughed.

"Turn around?" He tugged at Eddie's shoulder as he pulled away and Eddie went along with it until he found himself on his back, all of him exposed to the air. He felt infinitely more filthy like this, with the weight of his hard cock bobbing over his belly, needy and feverish and missing the sensation of something to rub against.

"Hey."

Eddie raised his head, blinking up in Richie's direction as he went on. "I know I made this weird first with the lights-off bullshit, but we're kinda past that now— d'you mind if I turn it on just now?" Richie swallowed audibly, his sticky, *disgusting* hand caressing Eddie's hip, and he pressed up into the touch. "I want to see you."

"Sure," Eddie croaked, after a moment or two, and his voice sounded wrecked. "Go for it." And then he waited around and blinked again as a bright yellow lamp near the bed came to life.

"Shit, I should've worn contacts for this."

That startled a laugh out of him, and Eddie craned his neck as he looked up, staring at the man above him, standing just off to the side with a condom wrapper in hand. Nice dick, Eddie thought offhandedly, because his horniness had priorities and that was the first thing he'd looked at. Nice thighs, forearms — and then his eyes fell on Richie's face, and he startled. He felt a shiver run through him, not the hot kind but like he'd just taken a dip into a very cold pool, and for a moment he felt like he couldn't breathe.

"What?"

Eddie shook his head. "Nothing, it's just— Are you sure we haven't met before?"

Richie looked at him— ogling, really, his exposed stomach and hard dick and his legs splayed open where he'd just *fingered* him open, and Eddie himself burn.

"When you say 'met'..."

"Not that, you dick. Where'd you go to college?"

Richie leaned in, crouching down by the bed, squinting slightly at Eddie's face. Then he kissed him on the lips. "I thought you'd looked me up online?"

"It's not like I *stalked* you, you weirdo. I went to Colby—"

"Well, I didn't go there." Richie stood up. "Do you really want to talk about college right now, because..."

And no, Eddie didn't really want to talk right now, but the way Richie curled his fingers around his ankle as he gently pushed his leg away made Eddie feel kind of queasy, too. There was *something*— and then he stopped caring, because he was getting fucked and nothing else really mattered right now. It felt kind of rough at first, the sharp burn and the strange fullness and the slight ache pulling at his thigh, but he liked the exertion of the act, the sweat pooling over his skin. The slow drag inside of him that was like a direct line to his twitching cock, dripping wet over his stomach.

“Don’t—” he tried to say, slapping Richie’s hand away. “Don’t touch me, I’m—” But he was fucking a jackass, apparently, because Richie wrapped his large warm hand around Eddie’s cock and gave it a long leisurely stroke that made his hips arc off the bed, and then he did it all over again.

He glared up at him from between his legs, weakly, but his breath hitched at the look of Richie’s face — raw and hungry, eyes gleaming. It made him feel wrecked, *wanted*. He sank his head back into the pillow and turned his face into it, the cool sensation a relief against his heated cheeks.

He sobbed into his hand as he came, teeth rattling in the back of his skull, feeling like his entire body had turned to mush and he couldn’t move— he just laid there, taking it, thrusting back in erratic little jerks in time with the breathless sobs shaking his chest. He found himself looking up at Richie, his shoulders and chest blotched red, and Eddie felt the urge to trace the line of his jaw with his fingertips, to cup his cheeks with both hands. It felt like...

Richie squeezed his eyes closed when he came, and the noise he made riverbed through Eddie’s whole body like a full on electric shock. He lost whatever thin thread of a thought he’d been hanging on, and—

“Nice,” Richie said, letting himself flop into the bed in a way that had to be obnoxious on purpose. He was warm and solid, close enough to touch, and Eddie’s hands had begun to move of their own accord when Richie jumped up again.

“Stay there. Don’t move.”

He rummaged around the room, opening a drawer, and when he turned around he had on large square glasses and the sight of him left Eddie feeling like he'd just been punched in the stomach.

"Really nice," he said, in a tone that was very flattering but also left Eddie feeling an odd sense of vertigo.

He got up.

"I'm going to take a shower," he declared, wobbling across the room on shaky legs and feeling definitely kind of sore. "Really, you should wash up too — you had your finger in my ass, do you have any idea of how many bacteria you have on your hands? Don't fucking touch anything. Definitely not me."

Richie's laughter followed him into the bathroom.

"Is that your idea of pillow talk?"

He didn't dignify that with an answer, turning on the shower and emerging some time later clad in a very fluffy towel. His eyes found Richie sitting on the couch in the outer room, wearing a red robe that looked stolen from a makeup trailer, and munching on something that might have been trail mix. Loudly. Eating with his hand.

Eddie's eyes went very wide.

"Relax. I washed up in the sink while you showered forever, calm down," Richie said, and Eddie decided he could breathe again. "Want some?"

"I can't eat nuts," he said automatically before remembering that he wasn't strictly allergic. "Please don't make a dick joke."

"I would never," Richie said, hands in the air. "You'd have to pay me for that. Hey, d'you wanna get takeout? I have somewhere to be in, uh, two or three hours? But there's no rush."

"Sure," Eddie said, thinking that two hours was a long time to spend naked together in a fancy hotel room. He let a hand close around his wrist and tug him down, curling up on the pillows into Richie's side.

“So,” he asked, some time later. “Has this happened before?” He made a vague gesture encompassing the both of them, and Richie put on a frown.

“This may come as a surprise, but I have had sex with other men besides you, yes.”

Eddie ignored that.

“I meant—”

“I know, I know. And no, I’m—I live in L.A. and no one there would admit to recognising a, uh, celebrity hook-up, and it’s a lot easier to navigate. People are professionally unimpressed. And no one really cares who I am in college towns in the Midwest, so. It’s just cities that freak me out.” He shook his head. “So no, no one from Grindr ever googled me before. What about you, do you cyberstalk people often?”

“I didn’t *cyber*—oh, god, just shut up.”

“And here I thought we were bonding.” He said it with his lips on Eddie’s neck, kissing his throat. “Is it a kink thing? Does being mean turn you on?”

“If I asked you to suck my dick, would you stop talking?”

He felt the edge of a grin against his skin. “I remember you being very into that.”

Eddie swallowed, feeling warm, and Richie laughed. “That’s adorable,” he said, voice low. He wriggled away from under him, manoeuvring Eddie’s body to sink into the cushions. “I’m going to blow you but, baby, you’re going to have make enough noise for the both of us.” He kissed Eddie’s hip gently, the crease of his thigh. “Or it won’t be fun.”

Eddie hid in the bathroom when the food arrived, which was just as well because the delivery boy apparently recognised Richie, and

Eddie listened through the half-opened door as he politely refused the request of a picture but offered to sign an autograph with hotel stationery from the desk.

“So, was that a dweeb or a college boy?” Eddie asked while they ate, and Richie choked back a laugh even though it wasn’t really funny at all.

Later still, after weighting pros and cons for a full twenty minutes, Eddie affected a very casual tone and said, “When do you leave again?”

Richie scratched his temple. “Uhm, Monday afternoon. And I have a big meeting right before that, sorry.” He sounded like he meant it, at least, and not like he was mocking Eddie for asking. Then he shrugged. “But, hey, I come here pretty often, if you’re up for it.” He wagged his eyebrows. “And when I say come—”

“Yeah, I get it.”

Eddie left shortly after, closing the door softly behind him, and for the rest of the evening he felt twitchy and out of sorts, physically sated and still jumpy and nervous. He fell asleep late into the morning after hours of shitty cable TV, slept in until noon and decided to eat out since there was nothing at home for him.

He checked Grindr again on Sunday night, out of sheer boredom after circling through five other apps and the evening news, and he was actually surprised to see a message from Richie waiting for him. He debated opening it at all, expecting a polite parting message and nothing more, or maybe a very bad sex joke.

Instead, there was a phone number. *Text me there*, the rest of the message said, *I'll give you a call next time im in NY.*

Well. It took Eddie embarrassingly little time to decide to reply, and considerably longer composing the actual message.

This is Eddie. Have a safe flight!

That worked, he figured. Non-committal, still polite, easygoing. After all, there was little chance they’d actually ever talk again.

He splashed his face with cold water and went to bed.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay everyone! Midterms happened, and this chapter was a bit trickier than I expected. Thank you for sticking with this story ♥□

Eddie's first-ever relationship had been in college. He'd been twenty-one, living in his mother's house and commuting twenty miles each way to attend classes, and it had been a minor miracle that he'd found the time to date at all.

His girlfriend's name had been Karen. She was from Minnesota, tall and sweet-natured; they'd dated for two years around their respectively busy class schedule, and she thought he was a gentleman because he wouldn't pressure her into having sex.

A week after their breakup he'd gone and slept with the first girl he could find, just to get it over with, and then a second and a third to see what the fuss was about. It didn't really work and he gave up soon after, and that had been the total sum of his sexual experience for quite a long while.

Then there had been Myra. Sometimes Eddie caught himself wondering if maybe he'd stuck with her long enough to get married because of how much his mother hated her, and wasn't that an absolutely miserable thought. But it had felt comfortable, a kind of familiarity he could lose himself to, and so stifling he couldn't breathe, and now he came back in the evenings to a dark empty home and wanted to scream.

He went out instead, as much as he could. He went to bars and met up with men he chatted with online and let strangers flirt and stare at him, taken by the same giddy rush of freedom he'd felt when he'd moved away for the first time. He'd been twenty-four then, cautious but still young enough to feel reckless sometimes, and no one would call him *young* now but sometimes he felt like it, coming home in the middle of the night and making plans on the fly just because he could.

He bought two new pairs of jeans and a smaller television to replace the one he'd mailed to Myra's temporary address, and let Jon from Claims drag him to trivia night a couple of times until he decided it was actually kind of fun. At a crappy bar in Queens, he let himself get picked up by a fresh-faced grad student who looked about fifteen years younger than him, which made Eddie feel like a bit of a sleaze but did wonders for his ego. They ended up in a shoebox of an apartment that looked like it had cockroaches in it, but it was cosy, even though the ugly posters on the wall let Eddie feeling terribly out of place.

Afterwards, the guy went to smoke a blunt by the window and turned around to offer Eddie a hit.

"Uh," Eddie said.

He had never tried weed, not even in college—he'd never done any kind of recreational drugs, period, out of some deep-rooted paranoia that was pretty stupid considering the number of medications he'd been on over the years and the amount of drinking he did socially. But some part of him had been scarred back in the eighties, and now it manifested in the form of an annoying voice in the back of his head that sounded a lot like his mother, whispering: *Just say no!*

"Maybe some other time," he said, instead, and left the apartment with the guy's number in his phone even though he knew he wasn't going to call. There was a roommate in the kitchen, eating cereals for dinner and wearing a John Jay sweatshirt, and Eddie was glad to get out of there.

So maybe he cruised a bit, and that was fun. He probably had more sex in three months than he'd had in fifteen years, and it was pretty good even though it came with sudden bouts of paranoia about condoms and blood testing and showering a lot. He made a point of only speaking to Myra through their lawyers, and that helped a bit when the shadow of self-doubt awoke in the back of his mind, whispering that he wasn't made to function alone, that he couldn't make it by himself. That Eddie should know that he needed looking after.

"That's bullshit," Eddie told his reflection in the mirror. The

reflection scowled right back, and he sighed and went to bed. It was a large bed, expensive and comfortable, and sometimes Eddie hated sleeping alone in it.

He never brought anyone home.

None of the guys he had sex with left him with the same excited afterglow as the first time, and Eddie hadn't decided how he should feel about that. Surely some of it had been the glamour—none of the men he met randomly had a suite booked to have sex in, or a large clean shower with a wealth of crisp towels, but that wasn't why he couldn't get Richie out of his head. There had been something else there, a connection he thought he'd felt, a feeling like something *clicking*—and that was when Eddie's train of thoughts usually ended, slamming right into a very awkward stop. Just putting it in those words made him feel embarrassed even within the confines of his own mind, like a teenage girl making a big fuss out of her first crush.

He should get over it, really. It was probably just the fun-time rush of having sex he actually enjoyed for the first time in his life, and maybe part of his stupid brain had imprinted on it. Nothing more, and definitely nothing personal. Time to move on.

He wasn't expecting to hear from Richie ever again. It was just a nice memory to revisit, alone at night in his empty bed in his too-big house; Eddie held on to it like something precious and come morning he pushed it away and tried his best to forget about it.

He hadn't saved Richie's number either, though he could have found it easily in his text history, out of some misguided desire of keeping expectations low. When the phone rang, all those weeks later, he answered like he would have any other call.

"Edward Kaspbrak speaking."

There was a beat.

"Wow, that's professional," came the voice, and something inside Eddie twisted even before he recognised it. "Hey, this is Richie? From... we met at my hotel in New York back in April. I don't know if—"

“I remember,” Eddie said. He grasped the edge of his desk, steadyng himself.

“Good. So, I’m in your area for a couple of days, and I figured, maybe you’re free?”

Eddie stilled. “Uh. Right now?”

This was stupid. This was sudden, dumb and preposterous. Eddie had a life, and a Google calendar, and he wasn’t about to jump on command.

“Not right *now*,” Richie was saying. “But, just asking. I’m here for the week and you have a nice dick.”

“I’m at *work*,” Eddie hissed, excitement and annoyance burning on his face like twin flames. “Look, just text me when you’re free? I’ll get back to you.”

“Sure. I liked the greeting, by the way, very professional. How do you spell your last name? K—A—S—”

“I’m not telling you.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m hanging up,” Eddie said.

“Is it K—A—S—P—B—R—A—K?”

“No”, he said, out of habit, and he’d closed the call before he realised that Richie had gotten it right.

He spent the afternoon intermittently having very unprofessional thoughts and feeling frustrated about it— it was stupid; there were sexier guys than Richie Tozier around. He had *been* with sexier guys than Richie Tozier in the last few months, like Ryan from the gym, and it had been just fine, thank you very much, but for some stupid reason it wasn’t Ryan he kept thinking about when he was jerking off.

His phone chimed with a text.

[2:37] here's my itinerary

Eddie glanced at it, suppressing his disappointment. Richie's schedule was crowded in the evenings and late mornings, and all day Sunday, he mostly seemed to be free in the afternoons well after Eddie's lunch hour was over. That asshole.

He typed, *I can't, sorry*, but couldn't bring himself to send it just yet. He spent a couple of hours fighting with various spreadsheets, and it was almost five in the afternoon when he texted, impulsively, *What about Thursday afternoon?*

His phone blinked to life half an hour later. *great!!*, it said, and that was it.

Eddie spent way too long fretting over Thursday. It was a sure fucking thing and Richie would probably show up at the door in boxers, so it wasn't like he had to try to impress anyone, but he still changed his clothes after leaving the office and debated with himself for twenty minutes if it would be rude to show up empty-handed.

In the end, he picked up a bottle of wine and made it to Richie's address, another mid-range Midtown hotel with big elevators and badly-dressed tourists loitering in the lobby. He was buzzing by the time he knocked on the door, without even the excuse of inexperience to justify his nerves, and then they were face to face and that only made it worse.

"Hi," Eddie said, feeling stupid. He looked Richie up and down—he had on dark jeans that looked actually nice, but his feet were bare. He didn't seem to care that he was standing on hotel room carpet, which was disgusting, and it was deeply unfortunate for Eddie that this look was apparently doing it for him.

"Hey," Richie said, staring right back. He nodded in the direction of Eddie's hand. "Planning on getting me drunk?"

Eddie rolled his eyes and pushed through the door. It wasn't a suite this time, just a large bedroom with a mini-fridge in the corner and a large TV with what looked like three of Richie's shirts draped over it. They ended up sitting cross-legged on the bed, splitting the contents

of Eddie's bottle and not really talking, and the whole time Eddie told himself that he wasn't staring.

"How's the job?"

Eddie blinked. "What?"

"Just wondering," Richie said. There was an easy smile tugging at his lips. "Are you playing hooky right now?"

"Oh, shut up." He felt a childish impulse to kick him, like children at a sleepover, but instead he just swatted at Richie's thigh with his hand. "I work ten hours a day, I can take the afternoon off every once in a while."

He left his hand where it was. Richie shifted slightly, flexing his hips against the bed, and circled Eddie's wrist with his fingers. "Good," he said. His face scrunched up behind his glasses. "So, you don't want to talk about work?"

"Not really," Eddie said, and Richie laughed.

"C'mere?"

He tugged at his wrist and Eddie let himself be pulled forward, carefully laying the half-empty bottle on the bedside table and rolling to his side on the duvet.

It was a comfortable bed if he didn't think too hard about how many other people must have fucked on it before. They made out slowly, wine breath and slight shivers from the cold of the air conditioning, but Richie's hands were warm as he undid the buttons of Eddie's shirt one by one.

"Oh, *good*," he said, pushing Eddie's pants down his hips. "Been thinking about this since I got off the plane." He skirted the pad of his thumb over the crease of Eddie's hip, leaning down to press a kiss there that left his skin tingling.

"Take your shirt off," Eddie heard himself say. Richie had very nice shoulders, he'd thought so from the first picture he'd seen, and they'd featured in many of his fantasies. He wanted to dig his thumbs into

the corded muscle while Richie was sucking him off. He wanted to fuck Richie on his stomach so he could look down and see his body spread out under him, press a searing kiss between his shoulder blades.

Richie's shirt ended up somewhere at the foot of the bed, like it deserved, but Eddie took some more care with his own clothes, folding them neatly over the back of a chair. He made sure the creases of his pants lined up and smoothed down his shirt at the shoulders, and folded his socks for good measure. Richie huffed from the bed.

"You know, if I wanted to see a striptease I'd have paid for one." His eyes were very dark, and he licked his lips when Eddie flipped him off.

"If I wanted to hear a shitty joke..." Eddie said, meaningfully, and Richie barked out a laugh.

"God, you're so touchy." He said it like it was a turn-on. "I'd give anything for you to suck my dick right now."

That was—a thought. Eddie swallowed, feeling like the temperature of the room had gone up about ten degrees. His eyes dropped down between Richie's legs before he could help it, then back to his face and down again. Richie had one hand in his boxers, the asshole, very obviously palming at his cock, and Eddie shuffled where he stood.

"Yeah?"

"Fuck off," Eddie said. He flopped back on the bed inelegantly, crawling on his stomach like a fish out of water. "Put on a condom first."

He'd meant it as a snappy, but his voice came out low and throaty and his hands shook as he tore open the packet and shuffled up between Richie's thighs. Richie wouldn't stop talking while he was getting blown, which was no surprise at all, furious lewd nonsense about Eddie's mouth and his looks, and hoarse pleads that made him feel flushed all over. The light touch of his hand on Eddie's flushed neck was almost reverential, and Eddie liked the noises he was

making, the loud hiss he couldn't bite back when Eddie pressed the flat of his tongue against the swollen head of his cock. He liked the harsh sounds of Richie's breathing, the smell of his skin, the way he pinned him to the bed afterwards and kissed him deeply.

After they were done they found themselves under the covers, and every point of contact between their bodies burned against Eddie's skin in hot pleasant tingles. He couldn't understand what this was, but he wanted every minute of it.

"Can I say something stupid?"

Eddie blinked, turning into the pillow. Richie didn't wait for a reply.

"Remember when you said— you asked me if we've met before? Did you figure it out, because sometimes I feel like..." He shook his head. "Maybe it's just my dick talking."

Eddie snorted. "No, I get it. But I have no idea."

"Did you use to go to bars? I lived in New York for a while," Richie offered. "I could've sucked you off in a bathroom stall in, like, '02."

"That's gross," Eddie said, half-heartedly, just as his treacherous dick twitched faintly at the idea of anonymous sex in a filthy bathroom stall.

"No, really, I went out to bars *a lot*. If the whole showbiz thing hadn't worked out I could've made a career out of it. Found myself a Wall Street sugar daddy—"

"Please stop talking," Eddie said. "No, I was in Boston in '02, actually. Grad school."

"Right, you're smart." Richie's breath was warm and light against Eddie's shoulder and the press of their bodies together was sticky, but kind of comfortable too.

"I lived in Boston for a while, too. Family moved there in the nineties." Richie shrugged. "Then L.A., then New York then L.A. again." He sat up suddenly, blinking down in Eddie's direction. "Hey. You busy tonight?"

Eddie frowned. “I thought you were busy. You texted—I thought you had a dinner thing.”

“Well, yeah. It’s a quick dinner thing, though, if you want to... I don’t know. Come by after.”

Eddie had no self-control, so he thought about it. Then he thought about the long drive home and shook his head regretfully. “I can’t really go back and forth. Traffic is...”

“I mean, you could stick around,” Richie said. “No pressure. Just stay here, or... I’d invite you to dinner but I don’t want to make it weird.”

“It wouldn’t be weird,” Eddie said, too quickly. “I mean. It doesn’t have to.” He looked away. At least they were *both* being creepily intense about this, whatever it was; it made him feel less awkward, bolder. “What kind of dinner is it?”

“A group thing. I know like two people there—I’m catching up with someone from my team and he invited me along, but it’s not like, work. I’m going to ask but I really don’t think my friend’ll mind if I bring someone.”

Eddie wasn’t really sure about that, but part of him didn’t care. He didn’t want to leave just now, which was stupid and needy and irrational, but at least they seemed to be on the same page. He went to shower while Richie made some phone calls, and afterwards he walked back into the bedroom wearing hotel slippers and towel-drying his hair.

“So, uh,” he asked. “What does your friend do exactly?”

Eddie knew very little about whatever Richie’s career actually entitled, except that he had a lot of Twitter followers and he didn’t pay for his own travel accommodations more often than not. He watched as Richie scrunched up his face.

“It’s—uh,” he said. “He’s on my writing team. He’s got a TV gig right now, and I know some of the people he works with, so we’re all going for stir-fry. But it’s not, like, a work dinner or anything.”

“And it’s fine if I just... show up?”

"Yeah, sure. I told him you're very well-behaved. Like a small dog," Richie said, and Eddie used the damp towel to smack him across the chest.

It was just past six; by the time Richie was dressed they still had enough time to make it there on foot instead of getting a cab, and en route Eddie witnessed the dubious pleasure that was Richie's fascination with tacky tourist merchandise.

"I get my agent a cheesy postcard from every town I've been in," he explained. "And trust me, I've been to a lot of shitty college towns."

There was something charming about the idea of Richie handpicking postcards, messily scrawling an address on the back. Eddie wondered how Richie's handwriting looked like; he looked at Richie's right hand, feeling the sudden urge to grab it.

He shoved it down his pocket instead. Eventually, they reached a large Korean restaurant Eddie had never been to before, and covertly he sneaked out his phone to check reviews and customer ratings.

Richie's writer friend was a tall, nervy young man with round glasses named André, and if he was puzzled by a surprise addition to their dinner table he was polite enough not to show it.

"Hey man, looking good." Richie clapped him on the back. "This is Eds, he's showing me the sights."

"Hey," André said, looking between Richie and Eddie but not saying anything. Eddie wasn't saying anything either; he felt another of those shockwaves rippling through him, hot and disorienting like a fever spike. He blinked, held out his hand.

"Hi. Thanks for having me."

"Sure," André said, affably, and made introductions to the rest of the group. Richie had been lying earlier when he'd said he didn't know anyone; Eddie watched him exchange familiar nods here and there, half-hugs and shoulder claps.

"We can be out of here in like an hour, tops," Richie said, grabbing Eddie by the shoulder to hold him back as they all went in. "I kinda

had promised I'd show up, and the food is really good, but I know—I mean, you're probably bored already.”

“It's fine,” Eddie said, and he kind of meant it. Once the usual pleasantries were over with he felt content enough sitting back and listening, not because he cared about any of the conversations but because Richie was doing a lot of the talking at their end of the table, asking after about one-time colleagues and sharing stories about stage mishaps.

He found that he liked it to just eat calmly and let Richie's words wash over him, loud and expansive, setting off those distant echoes that made him feel sharply fond and really frustrated at the same time. Before today he'd been happily blaming his stupid fixation with Richie on a sex thing, but now they weren't even touching and he still felt like basking in their proximity.

At one point, Richie grabbed Eddie's wrist under the table, casually, and Eddie's skin tingled at the touch. He didn't dare pull away—it was the last thing he wanted, really, and they kept at it for a glorious minute until someone else turned in their direction with a big smile, asking some question, and Richie let go of Eddie's hand like it burned.

They left an hour and a half into it, getting a cab this time, sitting quietly as and Richie's thigh pressed warmly against Eddie's all the way to the hotel. The room felt colder this time, and Eddie sat on the foot of the bed and shivered slightly as Richie undressed him slowly for the second time in one day.

It was comfortable, and electric, and then Richie bent his head and wrapped his lips around Eddie's cock while he fingered him open and that was pretty fucking good, actually. He let himself fall to his back on the bed, pressing up with his legs between Richie's thighs just to make him groan around his cock, trembling pleasantly at the sensation of it. He was twitching with anticipation when Richie pulled back, climbing up on the bed and kissing the side of Eddie's jaw.

“I'm pretty glad you picked up, you know,” he said, lazily stroking his hand down Eddie's stomach. “Would've have liked to miss out on...”

He trailed off, kissed him again. Then he drew himself up to his knees, looking down at Eddie with dark eyes. “So, I really want to come on your stomach.”

“Don’t make me kill you,” Eddie said, pleasantly. “I showered once already today.” Then he thought about it properly and licked his lips. “Next time?”

“Fuck,” Richie said, maybe at the image in his mind or maybe at the promise of a next time, as if that was any news with how fucking obvious they were both being. He cupped Eddie’s cheek with his hand and rolled them over, and he seemed very determined to get him off as efficiently as possible until Eddie had to dig his nails into Richie’s shoulder to make him stop.

“Wait.” His eyes flickered down Richie’s body, and his throat felt a little dry. “I want to come on your back.”

“You little hypocrite,” Richie said, rough and flushed, but Eddie had been looking and saw his cock twitch. It was wet and red and pleasantly heavy, and he reached out to grasp it just to make Richie’s breath hitch.

“You’re going to let me, though.”

“Yeah,” Richie said, and kissed him messily, shuddering into it. There was something about the slant of his jaw, the way his lips parted when he came, and Eddie drank in the sight of him and didn’t think he could ever forget it.

Later in the night, it started to rain. Eddie’s car was parked a few blocks away and he would probably get drenched on the way over, but he lied when Richie offered him to stay and said that it was just down the road.

“I really need to go in early tomorrow,” he said, and it was true, but what Eddie was really thinking about was that he didn’t want to wake up in this bed tomorrow. If he did, they’d end up making out for twenty minutes and lazily jerking off like teenagers, and part of him wasn’t sure he could take it.

Outside, there was a rumble of thunder. It was loud and sudden and Eddie jumped, startled by a sense of sudden fear— something about a storm, water rushing down the streets, feeling scared and small.

He blinked.

“Are you all right?”

“Just tired,” Eddie said, feeling like he couldn’t stay here a minute longer. “Gotta go.” But he found himself pushing Richie’s hair off his forehead, gently, and kissed him on the lips. “Thanks for dinner.”

This time, he saved Richie’s number to his phone.

Richie texted him a few days later, a rushed picture with an airport shop in the background. It was of Richie’s hand, holding a tacky fridge magnet shaped like an apple, with a yellow cab on it that said NEW YORK!! Richie’s caption said: *to remember our ride*.

Eddie wrote back, *That doesn’t even make sense as a shitty joke
as if you didnt laugh just now*

So, maybe he had. He didn’t tell Richie about it, but he was sure he could guess.

After that they kept on texting a couple of times a week, mostly initiated by Richie: pictures of grey-haired men with the caption ‘*he dresses like you!*’ and food pictures like some kind of hipster blogger, and short videos of hamsters in funny situations.

They were stupid texts about random things, and sometimes Eddie caught himself smiling over a new message and remembered that, actually, he had Richie hadn’t ever actually had a proper conversation between all the sex and the jokes and trying to untangle their strange sense of *déjà-vu*, and still often he felt like he knew more about him than he should. He found himself thinking that Richie would maybe like something or the other, even though he actually had no idea, and when he breached the topic carefully he discovered that his guesses had been correct.

Was it ridiculous, to think of somebody you hardly met and feel like

you'd known them forever? Probably, yes. Eddie had made peace with the awkward realisation that he apparently had plenty in common with the overexcited heroine of a romance novel, so he just tried not to think too much about it.

One afternoon, late into the summer, Eddie had to leave work early with a fever. The palms of his hands were clammy around the steering wheel himself home, and he'd sweated through his Brioni dress shirt by the time he made it home. He struggled to breathe.

Eddie was self-aware enough to admit to himself that he only rarely got sick, for all that he was terrified of it, but the few times it happened it sent him into a full-fledged panic. There was nothing worse than the feeling of his own body betraying him, the chilling awareness of it creeping up his ribcage, but before today at least he'd had someone there to look after him.

Being sick and left to his own devices was a thoroughly unpleasant experience. He stumbled to his well-stocked medicine cabinet, then got himself a glass of cool water to go with the pills, and at one point he hazily caught himself thinking that he would give nearly anything for his overbearing ex-wife to walk through the door and make him some soup so he didn't have to stand around in the kitchen shivering.

The worst thing was that if he actually called Myra she would probably come, but then she really wouldn't leave again. So Eddie sucked it up and dragged himself to bed, and there he had a hazy, confusing nightmare, tinged in blacks and violent reds. Richie was in it, for some reason, wide-eyed and terrified and covered in blood, and his screams rang in Eddie's ears when he woke up.

It was night outside; his ribcage hurt and Eddie thought seriously that he might be having a heart attack. He grasped blindly around for the inhaler that must be in his bedside drawer somewhere, but only managed to knock an empty glass to the floor. It shattered against the hardwood, and the sound made Eddie jump. He felt feverish still, and terrified, and he had to turn on the light before he could sleep again.

In the morning, he had to fight the strange urge to tell Richie about the nightmare. He didn't, because that was an entirely new level of creepy that would probably get him blocked, and stuck to their

aimless back-and-forth instead.

Their text conversation had evolved to include pictures on a semi-regular basis, from the relatively innocent to the highly compromising, and more often than not Eddie found himself reaching for his phone late in the evening, scrolling back up their text history with his off-hand and his pants suddenly tight.

Sometimes the pictures came with a caption, too, because it turned out that Richie put a lot more effort into crafting text messages when it was to a definite purpose. They were dirty and detailed, and Eddie would throw himself on the bed with his phone in hand and try not to hear Richie's voice in his head as he jerked off. It was too much, too deep, but he wasn't sure he knew how to stop.

It was September when Richie wrote that he would be coming to New York for a couple of days, and did Eddie have time?

There was a very small chance of Eddie actually saying no at this point, and they both knew it, and Richie had given enough notice so Eddie could shuffle things around to fit in with his stupid schedule. They agreed on Sunday, and Eddie added a large block to his Google calendar in the bright red he used for personal plans.

Richie called him from the airport when he arrived, which Eddie hadn't been expecting; he picked up the call in his car, driving from the office to the gym, and found a certain amount of satisfaction in the knowledge that Richie was apparently stuck in worse traffic than he was.

He stayed out late that night and fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. He woke up and went to bed again, and when he woke up on Sunday morning he was counting down the hours, jittery with restless energy.

He let that strange, magnetic pull tug him through the day, knee jumping in the car and whistling off-key to a horrible Top 40 song that was nevertheless stuck in his head. It was worse once he actually saw Richie face to face; he kissed him against the wall and tugged on his hair, trying to shut him up from whatever stupid story he'd started to tell about his flight.

“Well, you make a man feel wanted,” Richie said, eyes gleaming, and Eddie was about to tell him to fuck off when he went on, “I’m— you know, I really was looking forward to seeing you.”

He said it without even the hint of a joke, leaving Eddie dizzy and stupidly charmed, kissing him again so Richie wouldn’t get to look at his face.

“I want to fuck you,” he said, instead, and Richie groaned into the kiss.

“Oh, fuck, let’s do that.” His eyes were very dark. “Please, yes. Please.”

His hands were shaking, and the entire thing was done entirely too soon, but Richie certainly didn’t seem to mind. He had to leave right after, disappearing for most of the afternoon, and Eddie sat at the desk among the ugly hotel stationery to get some work done on his laptop. He perused the room service menu thoroughly before going back to the second page and settling on a salad, just to be sure.

It was well past sunset when Richie came back, bringing desserts and dressed unfairly good for once, in dark slacks and a dark red shirt under a leather jacket. Eddie stared, and then kept staring as they talked for a while. Richie had a tour shaping up apparently, though he looked tired as he spoke about it, and a guest star arc on a TV show back in California that he looked a lot more excited about.

He was good at telling stories, punctuating his anecdotes with over-the-top impressions of everyone he mentioned. Eddie might not know much about the kind of environment Richie moved in, but he understood well enough the familiar frustration with teamwork and scheduling and project deadlines, and he listened entertained as he stared some more. It had to be the shirt; it was pushed back on Richie’s forearms, half-creased in a way that made him want to take it off. Eddie swallowed around his spoonful of dessert, and waited.

They kissed for a while before falling asleep, because Richie had looked good and Eddie’s mouth felt dry looking at him, gently rolling around on the bed until their limbs felt heavy and too comfortable to move. He fell asleep to Richie’s warm hand running through his hair

and woke up on the opposite side of the bed, sheet tangled hopelessly around his legs, listening to Richie mumble something about how he'd frozen in the night and how Eddie should make it up to him right now.

"Not with morning breath, I won't," he said, still drowsy with sleep, and waited until Richie had gone to brush his teeth before he considered jerking him off.

It was slow and lazy, Richie's warm body half splayed on top of him, face buried in Eddie's chest, and afterwards Richie sucked him off slowly until he was trembling. Then, because he was an asshole, he pulled off and licked a warm wet stripe up Eddie's hip with his come-splattered tongue until Eddie pulled him off by the hair.

"Really?" he said, but he let Richie kiss him anyway with his disgusting mouth before he ran off to shower.

He came back to his phone ringing across the room, and frowned at it. It couldn't be the office—he'd shuffled things around at the office so he could come in a bit later today, and it was barely past nine. Then he looked at the name on the screen and winced.

It was Myra's lawyer's office.

"Yes?"

He sat down at the desk, still clad in the hotel robe, and feeling very stupid about it. Then he actually listened, and his morning got considerably worse.

He'd been the one to insist they only talk through their lawyers. It was stupid, and probably made him look like an asshole, but Eddie knew himself around Myra and he knew his tendency to give in. They hadn't spoken in person since the time he'd offered to help her with packing.

He'd felt like a piece of shit even then, kicking his wife out of her own house, but that was the way their marriage had ended up. She hadn't been expecting it—she hadn't done anything this time, really, but there had been all the times before, all the things they'd ignored

for far too long until it had all come crashing down.

It was, not to put too fine a point on it, a shitshow.

Myra's sister had called him once, and that had been awkward as hell, and just thinking about it made Eddie want to drown himself in the sink. And then there was Myra herself— in the past few months she'd gotten increasingly more vindictive, asking for more and more, making outlandish claims and doing basically everything in her power to be a pain in the ass. Sometimes Eddie thought that he might have done the same in her place out of sheer vindictiveness, but this was Myra and so he had no way to know if she wanted to ruin his life or just wanted him to come back.

When Richie returned, carrying two coffee cups and waltzing back in without a care in the world, Eddie was close to throwing something to smash the glass windows. Probably a fist.

"I didn't know what you liked so I got—" Richie took a good look at Eddie's face and paused. "Uh."

"I'm going to have to call you back," Eddie said into the phone, not smoothly at all. "Or, actually, I'll just check your email and let you know if I have any questions. I really— yes. Thanks."

He hung up.

"That looked tense," Richie said.

"Yeah."

"Wanna, uh. Wanna talk about it?"

"Fuck no," Eddie said. He couldn't help it—he laughed. The idea of telling the guy he was sleeping with about his divorce problems made him want to hit something with his car even more than the phone call had. "You said you have coffee?"

He grabbed the offered cup and sipped on it, watching Richie eye him warily for a long moment.

"Thanks," he said, and Richie took the hint and shrugged before

turning away to check something on his phone. He kept throwing him sideways looks as Eddie got dressed, and as he buttoned up his shirt Richie caught his eyes and gave a comforting grin that made Eddie feel stupidly fond.

He paused with his hands over his collar, suddenly wary. He thought about Myra, of the way he felt whenever his phone screen lit up with one of Richie's messages, the strange tug he couldn't explain.

There had to be something wrong with him, to feel so drawn to a barely-acquaintance he'd fucked all of five times. Maybe it was just the way Eddie was; maybe he was made to be weird and codependent. Maybe he didn't know what the hell he was even doing.

He turned around sharply.

"I have to go to the office," he said, loudly, to the room at large.
"Thanks for the coffee. And—stuff."

He shrugged into his jacket under Richie's surprised eyes.

"I thought you said you'd— do you have, like, a work emergency?
They want you to go in?"

"Something like that," Eddie said. "I have to— I'll call you, all right?"

And then the days went on, and he didn't.

Notes for the Chapter:

BTW writing that one throwaway line about sugar daddies made me *really* want the Pretty Woman-ish AU where Richie and Eddie meet at a bar, Richie is a very obnoxious Vivian, and Eddie is a much less smooth, uhm, Edward. I can't stop thinking about it and clearly you all should know this

4. Chapter 4

Eddie was good at self-abnegation.

There was a certain perverse pleasure in denying himself what he wanted — not always, but often enough to test himself and know he could still do it. Sometimes he went weeks without eating foods he craved, not because of allergies but because his mouth watered just thinking about it, and wanting something so much must be bad. He ran on the treadmill until his legs were about to give out and grunted under a barbell with his shoulders shaking, because if he was sore afterwards then it must be working, and the whole time he told himself, *just one more*. One more minute, one more time. One more hour without checking Richie's messages, because he wanted it so much it scared him.

It was a silent, quiet freak-out, weaning himself off the need he felt. Richie still wrote him every few days, good-natured nonsense that brightened up his day more than Eddie had any right to expect, but Eddie started replying less and less. He felt like some sort of martyr, and other times he felt just really stupid, but still he kept at it. If it hurt, it must be working.

Richie seemed to have missed the memo.

He had noticed his recent reluctance, of course, sending Eddie the occasional, *hey are u alright?* and *hope this helps* along with his silly links to stories about baby hippos or the world's biggest dildo, but he didn't seem particularly fazed. He still texted Eddie at least three times a week, stupid shit or streams of consciousness that really didn't require Eddie's input to keep going, and missed spectacularly all hints until a month into Eddie's stupid silent treatment, when he messaged him out of the blue and wrote, simply, *can i call you?*

It was Saturday, and Eddie didn't have anything better to do besides wallowing in misery. A multitude of scenarios went through his mind: Richie impatient, annoyed, telling Eddie that he just wasn't worth the effort. Would it count as breaking things off if they'd never been on in the first place? He hesitated, thumb hovering over the screen, but Richie deserved some kind of acknowledgement, at least.

sure, he typed, eventually, heart hammering in his chest.

Richie called immediately.

“Hey,” he said as soon as Eddie picked up. “Good morning.”

Surprisingly, he didn’t sound annoyed at all. He sounded like he was smiling instead, and he kept up a stream of light-hearted chatter as Eddie silently asked himself what the fuck was going on.

“So, doing anything fun on this fine morning?”

“Uh, driving around,” Eddie said. “I’m out getting groceries.”

“Let me guess, you go to the farmers’ market.”

Eddie-and-Myra had gone to the farmers’ market at least twice a month. Bachelor Eddie, who lived on pre-made meals, bought a lot of overpriced refrigerated shit. “Whole Foods, actually.”

“Meanwhile, I just had two pop tarts for breakfast,” Richie said, playfully. “I actually really want to go back to bed but I need to go into the city in like, an hour. It’s eight AM over here, you know.”

Eddie’s fingers drummed on the steering wheel as he glared around the parking lot, zooming in on a woman loading her groceries into the car.

“So, how are—”

“Fine,” he said, immediately. “Good.”

“Good. So, are you—”

The woman shut her car door and started to leave. Just as Eddie was about to make a beeline for her spot some kind of gnome on foot ran to it, effectively cutting him off. Eddie honked. “I saw that first, asshole!”

The gnome glared up at him—it was a teenage boy, who looked suitably scared but held his chin in a way that made it clear that it was going to be an uphill battle. An equally tiny girl was waiting

around in a beat-up car, hovering around the spot Eddie had definitely seen first. Scowling, he decided to let them have it.

“Sorry, I’m parking.”

“Yeah, I can hear that.”

“So, was there something you wanted to tell me?” Eddie asked. In the rearview mirror, he caught a glimpse of the girl’s car bumbling into an attempt at angle parking, and someone else loading groceries into their car. He sighed and started circling the lot again.

“Not really, I just wanted to say hi? Hope work is not killing you, stuff like that. I figured you were busy.”

“Oh,” Eddie said, softly. “Yeah, I’ve been...” Kind of a neurotic bitch. “Stressed,” he settled on, eventually.

He heard Richie chuckle in a burst of static. “Yeah, I get that. You should see me when I’m on tour, I’m an absolute disaster to be around.”

Thank fuck, the other car was leaving. Eddie slid into the spot before some teenager could get the jump on him again.

“Yeah?”

Richie snorted. “My team hates my guts. I mean, they’re professionals so they won’t admit to it, but I can tell. I panic when I have lots of stuff to do at the same time, and I get really fucking insufferable when I panic.”

Eddie laughed, turning off the ignition. “I can imagine.”

“Yeah, laugh it up, Eds.”

His hand froze, clenched around the key. Eddie cleared his throat. “What was that?”

“You mocking my inability to manage deadlines?”

“The name,” Eddie said, too quickly. “You said it in the restaurant,

too.” It had made Eddie’s head spin, like standing up too fast after one too many glasses.

“It’s a nickname, dude. ‘Eddie’ is, like, the name of someone’s uncle.” Then, uncharacteristically hesitant, “What, you don’t like it?”

“No, no, I do. It’s—” It evoked the feeling of an old comfortable coat, well-worn and well-loved. A familiar scent, and warmth all over. “It’s, uh.” Eddie pushed past the awkward tightness in his throat. “Just took me by surprise,” he settled on. “I like it.”

And then, hurriedly, “Also, screw you, *Richie*. That literally sounds like someone’s granddad.”

There was a laugh. “You got me there. But believe me, I got off lucky.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, my dad’s side of the family is terrible with names. Anyway—listen, I really have to start getting ready.”

Cold disappointment washed through him. “Oh. I shouldn’t keep you.”

“Hey, I called you. I’m glad you—I mean, I hope you can catch a break.”

Eddie felt all his hard-won detachment melt like icy sludge on the streets in a Manhattan spring. “Thanks, uh, and thanks for the call,” he said, earnestly. “It was... nice.”

“I’m always nice,” Richie said, and Eddie was smiling when he hung up. Then he closed his eyes, resting his head back against the headrest, and didn’t get out of the car for five minutes.

So much for getting over it.

Eddie's next plan was all about moderation. Maybe he had been stupid to deny himself something that made him happy, just like it was kind of dumb to go to Cipollini and skip the pasta, or sticking with soy milk in his coffee order when he actually kind of hated the taste.

He was going to be careful about this, he told himself, feeling like the opening sequence of some After School Special about cocaine addiction instead of a grown-ass man trying to navigate interpersonal relationships. It was a good thing that Richie lived on the other side of the country and had his own stuff to deal with, and it wasn't like Eddie had nothing else going in his life, either. As long as it was in small doses, he could manage.

So when Richie texted him on Monday he wrote back, and on Wednesday he forwarded him a stupid video he got from Dave at work, and on Saturday he got back from a run, took off his shirt and snapped a picture, feeling self-conscious and overheated and stupidly turned on just anticipating Richie's reaction before he'd even sent it.

They stumbled back into their casual rhythm, and life settled into something normal. Eddie stopped worrying so much that he would forget about some essential medical appointment without Myra there to handle the day-to-day stuff, and finally figured out how to cook without scrapping the bottom of the pan or letting food stick to it, though he had to throw away some kitchenware he'd ruined in the process.

The week after Richie's phone call, Eddie's work got suddenly a lot busier. He threw himself into it because he liked to keep his mind from wandering with something he was actually good at, but at some point the scales tipped over and he started to feel actually exhausted. It would blow over soon enough but, in the meantime, he found himself with limited time and patience and way fewer occasions to get laid, because it was actually kind of a hassle to peruse through online profiles and strike up painfully monotone conversations in bars just for half a chance at getting his dick wet.

So long to moderation, really.

how do you feel about phone sex? he texted Richie, late on a Friday

evening. It was early November and the weather was about as abysmal as Eddie's mood, and he tried and failed not to take it as a personal offence when Richie didn't reply for hours. It was the weekend, Richie wasn't going to be at home hibernating in bed after a sixty-hour work week, and probably had better things to do than be at Eddie's beck and call.

He fell asleep in a very bad mood and woke up to a text from Richie that said *call me this afternoon?*

"Disclaimer," he began, because that was obviously how you started phone sex. "I've never actually done this before."

He hoped Richie wouldn't ask him why he was doing it now—Eddie's reasoning went from Richie being only a thumb swipe away and *definitely* into him, to other much less dignified thoughts about Richie's laugh and his hands that probably would make him sound obsessed. Instead, he just hummed into the phone. "Put the phone on speaker?"

"I did. It's, uh, I put it on the pillow."

He'd also undressed, because if everything went as he'd expected there would be cleaning up to do, and put a towel within easy reach on the bottom sheet for good measure. He'd slipped under the covers, because it was cold, and now he was splayed naked and comfortable among fresh-smelling sheets, soft cock resting against his thigh and Richie's voice in his ear.

"And you're naked?"

He nodded, then remembered that Richie couldn't see him. "Yeah."

"Good. Gimme a sec, uh." There was a sound like fabric rustling.
"Good. So, what do you think about, usually? When you get off."

"Sex," Eddie said, curtly.

"I mean, sure. But like... stuff you've done, stuff you'd like to do?"

"Both?" Richie featured prominently in a lot of his jerk-off material, but he didn't think he could say it out loud. "Either."

“We can start talking about that,” Richie offered. “I think about blowing you a lot.”

His voice had turned low, a throaty whisper that made Eddie shiver.
“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m not even—I don’t even like sucking cock that much, you know. Like, it’s hot, but it doesn’t do that much for me. But you get so into it—it’s *really* hot, I can’t fucking help myself.”

“Yeah?” He didn’t know if he should feel flattered or embarrassed. He circled the root of his cock with his lube-slicked fingers, slowly. Wasn’t that how it was supposed to go? He tightened his grip a bit, feeling his dick fill out slowly as Richie hummed into the phone.

“Mm. I’m thinking about it now. The first time I had your dick in my mouth and you just couldn’t stop making those sounds.”

Eddie was warm, lying on his back under the cover, and he knew he must have flushed pink down to his chest. He started stroking his cock with his hand, slowly, tightening his grip on the upstroke, swirling his thumb around the head. He felt self-conscious, hyperaware of his own rough breathing.

“You touching yourself?”

Eddie’s face was hot. He wanted to say something snappy, *what do you think?* or *I thought that was the point*, but his throat was tight and his mouth dry when he opened his lips to speak. He swallowed.
“Yes.”

“That’s good,” Richie breathed. “I can hear it. You wouldn’t need to slick it up if I was there, you know, I’d get you all wet with my mouth. I’d— Shit, I’m thinking about it. I’d touch you all over.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Eddie, babe, you have such a hot body. I love your thighs—I wanna put my mouth there, I’d give you hickeys like we’re fifteen fucking years old. I want to lick your abs— No really,” he said, over Eddie’s startled bout of laughter. “You’re hot, dude, deal with it. I’m obsessed with it. I have this fantasy...”

It was nonsensical, the way Richie talked. Arousal curled down inside of him, heavy and red-hot.

"I'd start sucking you off, and then I just— I want until you're moaning and then I pull away. I kiss you all over. Your hip, over your stomach. I take my time, keep doing it until you're begging me to go back to sucking you off. You pull my hair."

Eddie held his breath, trailing off hand down his chest. He'd never been one for touching his body when he was getting off, but now he pictured Richie doing it, his hands large and steady. Richie's palm teasing lightly over his side, Richie's thumbs digging into the creases of his hips.

He thought about Richie's mouth.

Richie sucked cock like he talked, at full speed. He wasn't meticulous or fussy, he just went for it—he'd grip the shaft of Eddie's cock with a steady hand while he sucked on the tip, press the flat of his tongue against the swollen head, hum into it until Eddie's legs were shaking with the vibration. He'd slobber all over his cock with single-minded enthusiasm and good-natured smugness, and when Eddie was bursting with it he'd press the palm of his hands against Eddie's thighs and keep him firmly in place while he swallowed him down.

Eddie bit back a groan.

"Thinking about it?"

"I'm— yeah."

"That's good. I'd kiss up your thighs. I wanna do that, I think about it all the damn time. I'd take fucking forever with it. Drive you insane, babe, I wouldn't go back to sucking your cock until you were begging for it."

"I wouldn't," he protested, jerkily. He wouldn't give Richie the satisfaction. He thrust up into his hand, whining. "I wouldn't, I'd—"

"I think you would. I'd make you." Richie was making sounds like a phone sex chat line, ragged breaths that echoed straight through Eddie's fucking dick. He could feel his own pulse in the vein against

his thumb, heartbeat jamming loudly in his throat.

Richie gasped out, “You close?”

“Yes.” Eddie rolled over the bed and closed his eyes, turning in the direction of Richie’s voice coming from the phone on the pillow. He curled up around his hand on his cock, all coiled tension, skin covered in sweat. “Almost. Keep talking.”

“You’re right, you wouldn’t— you wouldn’t let me play tricks with you. You’d get tired of being teased, eventually. You’d just grab my hair and fuck into my mouth. Make me choke on it.”

“Fuck,” Eddie said, eyes still tightly closed. “I can’t—”

“You’d be so good at that. You wouldn’t let me pull away, shit, I’d love it,” Richie was saying, rambling, and whatever else Eddie had been about to say — *I can’t believe you*, maybe, or *I can’t fucking wait to do that to you* — all his words choked up in his throat and he muffled a moan into his free wrist as he came, hips stuttering.

There was sweat prickling at his eyes, pooling over his nape. Eddie blinked.

“Holy shit.”

“Thanks,” Richie said, cheerfully, in-between loud shallow breaths.

“Wait, you haven’t— didn’t you?”

“No.” The speaker buzzed with a low sound— a deep groan and, underneath, the slap of flesh against flesh. “Not yet. Too busy doing all the work.”

“Do you what me to, uh,” Eddie cleared his throat. “I could help?” He was suddenly conscious of his naked skin pressed against the sheets, the heat in his cheeks. He felt lax and pleasantly wrung out, but he doubted he could put on the kind of show Richie had.

“Send me a picture? I wanna see you.”

A picture, he could do that. Eddie felt his flush deepen at the thought

and that probably made him look even more obscene, a red chest to go with his softening dick and come-stained thighs. He grabbed his phone with his less disgusting hand and sneaked one arm under the cover, shuddering as he heard the click of the shutter. He sent it without looking at it, afraid of losing his nerve.

“Fuck,” Richie said, on the other side of the call. “Fuck, all right, thanks. That’s not going to take any time at all. Shit. Nice.” Eddie heard the sound of his breath quickening, shallow pants and whispered nonsense—*you look so good babe*, Richie was saying, *Eds, I want you so bad, I wanna touch your pretty dick*. It was stupid and endearing, and Eddie smiled tiredly into his arm.

Afterwards, Eddie felt like it would be rude to just hang up, so he brought his phone while he waddled to the bathroom and got cleaned up, call still on speaker.

“So, what brought this on?” Richie asked over the sound of the water running.

“It was Friday night and I was horny, sue me,” Eddie said, then hesitated. “I hope you didn’t open it somewhere inappropriate.”

“No, I was just doing a set last night. No biggie.”

“What do you mean, no biggie, shit. You were *in public*? ”

“I meant that I opened it after, it’s fine. It’s not like I read my texts out loud on stage.”

“Oh. All right.”

“I went to a party after, and it was all I could think about.”

“Good,” Eddie heard himself say, low and self-satisfied. “We should do that again sometime.”

He met his own eyes in the bathroom mirror, and he liked what he saw there.

The tour Richie had been talking about started out small, with a few dates in up and down the western seaboard. Eddie knew this because Richie sent him pictures, mostly of airports or ridiculous town signs but, eventually, he started dropping off.

Eddie remembered Richie saying that he was a lot less pleasant company when he was touring, and found that he didn't like the change. He'd gotten used to the warmth of Richie's attention whenever he wanted it, and now he felt cold and bereft; he caught himself entertaining a series of bitchy thoughts about Richie being too busy with whatever fuckbuddy he had lined up in Nevada or Seattle to waste time texting back his fuckbuddy from New York. It was annoying, and then he got annoyed at himself for being annoyed in the first place, and it was like a recursion of sulk that wouldn't let him catch a break.

The weather was shit, which didn't help, and Myra's lawyer called with more demands on Myra's behalf, which didn't help either. Eddie comforted himself with the thought that at least this year he was free from Thanksgiving lunch at Myra's sister's house, and his life was now thoroughly cleansed of his brother-in-law and his terrible opinions about local politics.

Jon from work was going to have another kid and bought drinks for half the office to celebrate. It was a nice evening and later, on the cab ride home, Eddie's phone lit up with Richie's number, showing an incoming call. He swiped his thumb across the screen embarrassingly fast, turning the phone over so quickly he almost dropped it.

"Hey."

"Hey, sorry for calling so late—"

"It's fine," Eddie said immediately. "I'm getting home now. I was out."

"So, I'm flying over to your side of the country."

Eddie straightened up. "Oh?"

“I’m going to Boston for a couple days over Thanksgiving, and then I have to be in Oregon right after but I thought—I could be around on Tuesday if you don’t have anything lined up?”

Eddie was going into the office on Thanksgiving this year, and definitely didn’t have anything lined up for the week. Not that it would have changed much if he had. “Not really, no.”

“So it’s cool if I come by?”

“Sure. Where are you staying?”

There was a pause. “Well, I don’t—I haven’t booked anything yet. I could get somewhere near to where you are, if that’ll help. So you don’t have to go back and forth. Or... whatever works, I could—”

“Wait, wait.” Apparently, Eddie needed this spelled out like a five-year-old. “So you don’t have anything to do here? Like, nothing planned?” There was that feeling of warmth again, insidious and inescapable.

“I mean, I was hoping I’d do you,” said Richie, joke falling a bit flat. “Told you, I’m going to Boston. You’re, like, on the way.”

“Oh.” Eddie still felt like he may be imaging half of this conversation. He shook his head to get rid of whatever buzz was making him especially slow. “Yeah. Sure.”

“You don’t sound very... if you have other stuff to do, ’s not a big deal.”

“No,” he said, hurriedly. “No, no, sorry.” *Shit.* Richie was going to change his mind. “I was just—I’d like that. Absolutely. Sure.”

The more he spoke the more tangled his tongue felt, the more he felt his face grow heated. Richie made an amused noise into the phone.

“Are you drunk?”

“No.”

“Not even a little bit? Because you sound off.”

"I'm not drunk, you jerkass, you took me by surprise. Sure, come here, I'd like that." God, he'd said that already. "I'm in North Hempstead, if you can make it over here. I'll pick you up."

Despite his sudden bout of speechlessness, Eddie wasn't actually tipsy. He'd had all of a drink and a half, and so there was absolutely no excuse for what he said next. "You could stay over, actually." The words rolled out of his tongue before he could even think of reigning them in. "Like— no need to book a hotel, I could. We could go to my place. Have dinner. I bet you're tired of room service."

Richie wasn't saying anything. Eddie cleared his throat.

"That all right?"

"Yes," Richie said, slowly. "Yes, thank you. I'll send you my flight information, let me get on that. You... just go sleep it off, all right?" he added, lightly, and so Eddie hissed at him and repeated that he wasn't actually drunk, Richie, fuck right off.

It was a lot easier to joke than to think too hard about any of this.

On Tuesday morning, Eddie started to worry that his words to Richie that they should get something other than room service might be misinterpreted as an offer to make him dinner.

Eddie, unsurprisingly, couldn't actually cook. He'd lived with his mother until his mid-twenties and had been one year out of graduate school when he'd started dating Myra, who for all her faults had a nurturing attitude and liked to be appreciated. She'd put a lot of effort into cooking for Eddie, doing his laundry and his shopping and making sure everything was the way he liked it, even if it'd all come with a healthy side of stifling manipulation, and so he just never had much of an incentive to learn. He could feed himself in a pinch but, while he knew a lot about the properties of macronutrients and balanced caloric intake, matters such as seasoning and taste eluded him.

He was still at work when he started wondering if he should take Richie out. He did a quick search of restaurants in the Manhasset area — should they have Japanese? Italian? Fusion cuisine? — and seriously considered making reservations before he stopped with his phone halfway to his ear, deciding that it would be going too far.

Richie's plane had landed at one; at three-forty he texted Eddie the address of a coffee shop. *they have wifi, take ur time.*

He didn't take his time, but it was fine because it was a slow day and he'd been warming his ergonomic desk chair since seven. He cursed at several drivers and a couple of trucks on his way out of Manhattan, and by the time he swung by the coffee shop he found Richie waiting for him outside, a bag swung over his shoulder and wearing the same leather jacket as last time.

It was a good jacket, Eddie thought. It stretched nicely on the shoulders. Out loud, he said, "What the fuck, dude, it's November. You'll freeze."

"I wasn't going to pack a winter coat in a carry-on bag, it's fine, you'll just chauffeur me everywhere. Also, hi."

"Hi. Put on your seatbelt, please."

He did, and Eddie watched the red light blink off the dashboard. "Nice car. I get why you can't find parking in this."

Eddie ignored the sarcasm. "Thanks. I've been thinking about upgrading it."

"I mean, if I didn't have first-hand proof I'd have serious questions about the size of your dick by looking at this."

Eddie turned to look at him. There was stubble on his face, from waking up at an ungodly hour and flying cross-country just to see Eddie, and dark circles under his eyes. His eyes dipped lower, to Richie's mouth, his throat.

"Did you wash your hands after the plane?"

"What?"

He watched from the corner of his eye as Richie caught on. “Is this a sex thing?”

“Could be.” Eddie went back to looking at the road. “There’s hand sanitiser in the armrest.”

“You little *freak*,” Richie said, but he opened the bottle quickly enough and rubbed a large drop of it over his hands. “Better?”

“Mm. We’re almost there.”

They got to the house just as the last of the sunset tinged the sky a fiery purple. Richie looked around.

“Nice place.”

“Thanks.” It hadn’t been as nice a decade ago, but they’d worked on it, and at least home décor was one area in which his tastes and Myra’s had aligned almost perfectly.

And then, because it was going to come up, Eddie took a breath and said, “I’m trying to decide if I should let my ex have it. In the divorce.”

“Oh. Ouch.”

He shrugged. “It’s— whatever. The house’s in my name, it’s just...”

Eddie, back then, had wanted this house because he thought it went well with the kind of man he ought to be, along with the car and the job and the kind of wife who ironed all of his clothes. He’d been seeing Myra even then but they hadn’t been engaged yet, and the only time she’d brought up the issue of the property deed after the wedding he’d blown her off. A nasty little part of him had always liked the idea of Myra being financially dependent on him, to pay her back for all the ways in which she controlled his life.

Whatever. It was a big empty house; maybe he’d keep it and maybe he wouldn’t. He gestured for Richie to follow him inside.

“Take off your shoes,” he told him, doing likewise. He took off his coat and hung it up, smoothing down the creases. “You can drop your

bag over there, come on—”

And then he was grasping Richie's shoulders and tugging down, smacking their lips together in a messy kiss.

Richie's mouth tasted like coffee. The hold of his arms felt familiar, and there was something bubbling up in Eddie's chest, big and warm and messy. He dug his fingers into Richie's shoulder to keep him close and kissed the corner of his mouth, feeling slight stubble under his lips, prickly and pleasant.

“Well, hello again,” Richie murmured, sounding absolutely ridiculous, and Eddie sighed happily into the kiss.

When Richie tried to disentangle, gently, he didn't let him. He pushed Richie's stupid sexy jacket off his shoulders, feeling the texture of it under his palms, the smell of leather around his neck. Richie's hand slid up his sides, tugging at his collar.

“Careful with the shirt, it's handmade,” Eddie hissed, feeling Richie laugh against his lips.

Richie's lips were at his neck now, rough cheeks scraping lightly against the skin, and Eddie hummed softly and shivered up into it. He tugged Richie's jeans open, shoved them down.

“Wait—” Richie said, but he shut up pretty fast once Eddie had his mouth on his throat and his hand down his pants. He pressed the heel of his hand against Richie's cock through the thin fabric of his boxers, drawing a startled groan.

“Shit you're just going for it, aren't you? Don't you want to—bedroom?”

“It's fine,” Eddie muttered. He pressed on Richie's chest with his other hand, urging him backwards into the kitchen so he could shove him to sit on the granite counter, pushing Richie's legs open so he could get in closer.

Like this it was easier, standing between Richie's thighs so they could keep kissing properly, Richie's hands splayed over his hips as Eddie squirmed into it. He kept his hand where it was, rubbing Richie's

cock through the damp cloth till Richie started gasping into their kiss, hips thrusting up in small jerks.

“Eds, you trying to— do you want me to come in my pants?” Richie's fingers dug into his ass. “That something you get off on?”

“A bit,” Eddie said, humming. He hadn't planned this, it just— he'd looked at Richie in the car and he'd wanted him, and he couldn't wait. He kissed the side of Richie's jaw, under his ear, his neck. Richie groaned.

“You know, no one's around. You can be louder than that.”

“Is this revenge for all the shit I said on the phone?”

Eddie laughed, startled. “I wasn't— I didn't think about it, I just...” Richie's hand was tugging at Eddie's shirt over his belt, pulling it out of the way, and Richie ran his thumb over a thin sliver of bare skin right at Eddie's waist. Eddie sighed against his neck. “I just want you,” he said, and gasped in surprise when Richie groaned and came messily in his hand. He kissed him through it, frenzied, relishing the warm feeling of Richie's touch on his bare skin and feeling like something in his chest was about to burst.

Eddie pulled back when Richie stopped shuddering and blinked up at him, finding Richie's eyes dark and dazed. He felt like his whole body should be shaking with everything he felt, but his hands were steady and his voice surprisingly even when he said, “So, this is the kitchen.”

Richie barked a deep laugh, his arm tightening around Eddie's waist. “You gonna give me the tour?”

“Bathroom next. You stink of plane pollution.”

“You still jumped me, sweetheart.”

He sounded very happy about that. With some reluctance, Eddie stepped away. “I'll bring you up stuff from your bag. Come on, follow me, I need to go wash my hands.”

Richie followed in Eddie's footsteps, bodies brushing close as they

went up the stairs. He slid his finger through Eddie's belt loop, tugging gently. "So, you want me to—" He kissed the back of Eddie's neck, making him hum under his breath.

"Shower, come on." Eddie pulled back, grudgingly. Just the thought of Richie touching him when he was so keyed up made him shiver, like something inside of him was buzzing in rhythm with his breathing.

He left Richie in the bathroom and fled to get changed, skin tingling with every heartbeat.

Richie hadn't eaten since breakfast, unless you counted some cookies at Starbucks, so Eddie suggested they have an early dinner.

"We could go out," he said, thinking of his almost-reservations. "Lots of good places nearby. Or we could order in, or—I think I have frozen lasagna in the freezer, if that's your thing."

"Not, like, one of those green vegan lasagna things, right?"

"No. Regular lasagna."

"Great, let's have that."

Eddie took two plates and cut two portions to heat up in the microwave while Richie looked from over his shoulder.

"Maybe we could just have put it in the oven," Richie pointed out, glancing in the direction of the big fancy oven Eddie didn't actually know how to use. "That thing looks like a spaceship, it'll be cool."

"Microwave is faster." Eddie wasn't about to admit he couldn't use his own kitchen appliances. "Get out the glasses, come on."

They ended up eating sitting at the counter where Eddie had just gotten Richie off, which left Eddie feeling pretty good about himself. He liked the way Richie was looking at him, eyes still a bit hazy,

smiling slightly.

“So, what are you going to Boston for?”

“Family lives there.” Richie shrugged. “My parents, one of my sisters. My aunt’s coming in from Maine.” He grimaced theatrically. “It’s going to be so fucking loud.”

“And then you’re off to Oregon?” Eddie asked, mostly because the throwaway mention of Maine had given him the chills. He didn’t want to think about his own family shitshow, the long uncomfortable years he’d spent living with his mother in his aunt’s house. “How long’s this tour going to be?”

“Few more months.” Richie stabbed his lasagna, looking faintly put-off. “I mean, I actually don’t mind the travelling, I’m just—not at my best right now.”

Eddie made a sympathetic noise in his throat, even though sympathy came hard to him as a rule, and he didn’t really understand what Richie might be upset about. “Wanna talk about it?”

“It’s just, uh.” Richie rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, readjusted his glasses over his nose. “I’m not very thrilled with my shit right now, but I can’t do anything about it even if I had time to put my writing team back together. Which I don’t. But I wouldn’t anyway, really, I’m just being a whiny bitch.”

Eddie blinked. “You know none of that made sense, right?”

“Fuck off,” said Richie, an eloquent adult who told stories out loud for a living. Then, methodically cutting his lasagna into tiny smithereens, he told Eddie about his writing team and how he’d been getting frustrated with things of late.

“So I have a question.” Eddie raised up his hand like a kid in class. “How’d you get famous as a comedian if you can’t actually write jokes?”

“Fuck you very much, I do,” Richie said, with some more of his usual levity. “I write some stuff. I started out doing open-mic, I fine-tune a lot of my shit. I just don’t like to get personal on stage.” He drummed

his fingers against the counter. “It’s just— it’s a lot easier to get marketed as, like, relatable personal stories, and that’s not really what I’m about, so. I have a good team. You’ve met André.”

“André writes your shit for you?”

“Hey, not all of it.” Richie frowned. “Do you have a beer?”

Eddie had about five different brands in the fridge, and went to fish out the weirdest one.

“Look, I’m not wild about it, but it’s not the end of the world. I like doing shows, it’s fun,” Richie said. “I’m thinking I could use a break, but I have a few months to go. It’s not like I mind being the centre of attention.”

He handed Richie his beer and took one for himself, opening it with the end of his fork. “What kind of break?”

Richie shrugged. “Thought maybe I’d jump into TV for a while, see how that’s like. Try a nice steady job with and less jumping from place to place.” He took a long gulp from his beer, and looked at Eddie. “What about you?”

“What about?” said Eddie, taken aback.

“I don’t know, I told you all about my deep existential conflicts.” He looked around, sweeping a long dramatic look across the kitchen, all wood and granite and cosy earthy tones. “You’re divorced?”

“Ah. That. I’m getting there, hopefully.”

“Crappy ex?”

He could have told Richie he didn’t want to talk about it, and Richie would drop it. Eddie didn’t want to talk about it, not really, but he had a cold beer in his hand and another living soul in his house for the first time in six months, and Richie had flown all the way from Tacoma or wherever just to get a handy in Eddie’s kitchen, so he probably wouldn’t run away right now if he caught wind of how messed up Eddie was.

Eddie took the plunge. “My ex-wife, yeah. It’s shitty.”

He felt a brief flash of gratification in the look of surprise on Richie’s face, the arc of his eyebrows as his eyes went wide. “Oh. It’s like that.”

“Worse. It’s—” Eddie shook his head. Just the thought of attempting to explain the huge fucking disaster that had been Eddie-with-Myra was daunting. “So, this time, a few years ago, she told me she’d cheated on me just to see what I’d do. I couldn’t care less,” he added, stopping Richie dead in his tracks. “And, god, she hated that. We had a screaming match.”

Myra had done most of the screaming, really. When it came to histrionics Eddie could give it as good as he got it, but not that time, not when it had been clear it was exactly the reaction she’d been looking for. She’d confronted him right there in the kitchen, pale and vicious, and plainly the last thing she’d been anticipating was that Eddie would shrug it off and say he expected her to get tested for STDs and that he was going to bed. That had set her off spectacularly — Eddie remembered her screaming at him that he’d never cared and never would and he’d ruined her life. *Whatever*, he’d said, swallowing down the urge to yell back until his lungs burned, because he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

He’d packed his bags and got a hotel room, not because he couldn’t be around his wife but because he wanted to hurt her; if there was one thing Myra hated the most it was being ignored. The thing Eddie hated the most was Myra crying, because she did it often to exhaust him into doing whatever she wanted, but that time when she’d called him in tears she’d been sincere, and Eddie remembered taking some small satisfaction in that because at least he’d hurt her back. He’d moved back home two weeks later as if it’d never happened, and he never once thought about leaving.

“Wait, let me get this straight,” Richie was saying. “She cheated on you and then you had a fight because she was mad that you weren’t angry?”

“Kind of?” Eddie said. “It was... worse than that. Brutal.” Like many memories of his marriage, revisiting it made him feel torn between

shame at his own behaviour and sheer maddening relief that she was out of his life. “I’m honestly not sure if she actually cheated. Like, something definitely happened, she wouldn’t just make that up, but I think she might have exaggerated the details. Didn’t ask. Didn’t care.”

Richie was staring. “Well, shit, and I thought my relationship history was a mess.”

Eddie rubbed his hand over his face. “Thanks?”

“Fuck, no, don’t give her the house. Wow.” And then, “Who she cheated with?”

Eddie cleared his throat. “Our chiropractor. It’s okay, you can laugh.”

“I’m mentally reconsidering my understanding of the universe. I thought you were a lot cooler than you obviously are.”

That would have set Eddie down a very paranoid path if not for the way Richie said it, smiling brightly with his whole face to take off the sting. Eddie smiled up at him. “You thought I was cool?”

“Thought, yes. Past tense.”

“Oh, shit, I blew it.”

“It’s okay, you’re still—” Richie’s smile dropped off, mouth twisting around something unspoken. He looked down to his mostly-empty plate. “You’re still okay, I guess.”

“You were going to say something else.”

“Yeah, I was going to say ‘fuckable’ but I don’t want you to think I’m crass.”

“Right,” Eddie said, unspeakably curious, but he knew a losing fight when he saw one and decided to let Richie have it.

Once they'd cleared the dishes, Eddie said, "Do you wanna go out?"

He still felt restless. It probably had something to do with Richie being in his house; they'd washed dishes together and fought half-heartedly over the television in the living room before Richie had realised that Eddie didn't have cable and stomped away in disgust. It was different from their usual pattern of mutually-gratifying sex in anonymous hotel rooms. Hell, they'd talked about *feelings*.

All in all, even Eddie with all his neuroses was starting to think that Richie might actually like him, as opposed to just liking him for his dick. Eddie, who found himself ridiculously drawn to the entire package, wanted more of that.

So he said, "I mean, I know it's cold, but we could—I don't know, whatever you like to do back in L.A. Stuff you don't get to do on tour." Then he thought about it. "We could go see a movie."

"I mean, we could see a movie here if you had cable. Or Netflix. But sure. Do you have a place in mind?"

"Uh," said Eddie. "I haven't—I haven't gone in a while. Lemme check Yelp."

All the movie theatres in the area had at least four stars on average, so they picked the biggest one hoping for more options among the showings. They spent the entire drive fighting about what they should watch, good-naturedly, mostly because Richie wanted to see an animated movie about flying chicken nuggets and Eddie wouldn't have any of it.

"It's stupid," he protested, and Richie actually *pinched his leg* and looked very offended.

"You know that I do voice-overs for animations, right? Are you dissing my craft?"

"Your craft is 50% dick jokes," Eddie said loudly, and so on and on until they made it to the theatre and they still hadn't decided.

"We should get popcorns. Big bucket. And... d'you want a soda?"

“Not really,” Eddie said. “I don’t eat popcorn either.”

A big poster by the ticket booth advertised DALLAS BUYERS CLUB. Richie glanced at it and went very still at Eddie’s side. “God, I can’t stand that one. Pick literally anything else, whatever, I’ll—I’m going to get the food.”

In the end, Eddie bought tickets for the latest superhero release. It had been out for a while and the screening was only half-full, so they ignored the number printed on their tickets and sat out of the way.

“Are you sure you don’t like popcorn?” Richie whispered as the movie started, chewing on a handful very close to Eddie’s ear. “C’mon, there’s butter, they’re good. Try it.”

Eddie grasped one single popcorn between thumb and forefinger, eating it slowly. “It’s not bad,” he allowed, and under Richie’s indulgent grin he took another one.

As he chewed slowly, he felt another of those small shockwaves coming up. It was something to do with how close they sat, and the dark of the room around them, the blue reflection of the screen on Richie’s glasses. He was close enough to feel the warmth of Richie’s leg against his knee, smell the scent of his own shower gel on Richie’s skin, and the salt and butter of popcorn on his tongue — all of it coming together, making his head spin. Eddie turned around and pressed his forehead against Richie’s shoulder, breathing it all in, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that they must have done this before.

“Yeah, this is pretty dull,” Richie muttered into Eddie’s hair. “Wanna make out?”

Eddie snorted a laugh but turned his head around anyway, tasting the salty crumbs on Richie’s lips. They kissed slowly, unhurriedly, and after they went back to the movie Eddie kept his hand on Richie’s knee.

The next time Richie fished a handful of popcorn from the bucket he brought his hand to Eddie’s mouth instead, lazily swiping his thumb across Eddie’s bottom lip.

“Open up, babe.” He’d put on a lascivious tone that made Eddie burst into laughter. Richie took the chance to shove the popcorn into his mouth and Eddie bit him — just a nib, really, teeth closing for a short instant against the pad of Richie’s thumb; but Richie hissed as if he’d actually dented the skin and said, under his breath, “Kinky.”

“You’re a dumbass,” Eddie said, but the next time Richie tried to feed him popcorn he swiped his tongue around Richie’s fingers, wrapping his lips over his teeth and sucking sharply around the fingers in his mouth until his cheeks hollowed. Richie’s leg jumped under Eddie’s hand, and Eddie laughed again.

“Watch the movie, you fucking menace.” Richie took another handful of popcorn. “Take it. I knew you were full of shit.”

They bickered quietly, huddled close in the back. Every once in a while they’d kiss, light and quick. Eddie kept his hand on Richie’s leg, stroking up his thigh over his dark jeans, and Richie’s butter-sticky fingers traced the curve of Eddie’s lips and the side of his jaw. They drifted into each other, shifting around in the dark until Eddie found himself with the side of his face tucked against Richie’s collarbone and his thigh splayed halfway over Richie’s lap; he closed his eyes and breathed him in, feeling a warm sense of belonging.

The next time Richie kissed him it was filthy, open-mouthed and wet, lips skirting down the side of his throat. His free hand trailed down Eddie’s flank to the waistband of his pants, and Eddie went still.

The hand drifted lower, pushing his shirt out of the way. Eddie swallowed around the hot thrill in his chest and dug his fingers into Richie’s thigh, exhaling slowly, mind in overdrive. If he told Richie to stop, he’d laugh at him, so Eddie wasn’t going to do it. Richie wouldn’t go through with it, anyway, but he *might* — and so Eddie sat there with his heartbeat in his throat as Richie’s fingers traced the waistband of his boxers.

With studied carelessness, he took another handful of popcorn.

Richie made a noise like he couldn’t believe this either, and then his hand was most definitely on Eddie’s dick, palming him roughly through his underwear. This was ridiculous, absolutely fucking

ridiculous, and Eddie was definitely getting off on it.

His half-hard cock twitched under Richie's touch and he laughed, incredulous. He couldn't believe this was happening to him— about to get a handjob in a movie theatre, watching a comic book flick, at thirty-seven fucking years old. His shoulders shook, and he muffled another bout of laughter into Richie's chest.

"Not really the reaction I was going for," Richie muttered and Eddie tilted up his chin and kissed him.

"Get your hand off my pants, Rich."

"It's like today you don't want me to get you off," Richie complained, and Eddie hushed him before they got kicked out.

"I want to *fuck*." He enunciated the words slowly into Richie's ear, enjoying the small hitch in his breath. "And that's not gonna happen if you don't stop right now, because despite the way we've been acting I'm not actually fifteen years old."

"You drive a hard bargain," Richie sighed, but he smoothed Eddie's clothes back in place. He grabbed Eddie's hand and kissed the back of it, theatrically, and didn't let go for the rest of the movie.

It was freezing when they left the theatre, and Eddie wished he'd worn gloves. Richie sang Alanis Morissette in the car and messed up with Eddie's carefully-programmed radio settings, and they were in high spirits and only mildly cold as they pulled up to the house.

Inside, as they walked up the stairs in Eddie's house, Richie cleared his throat. "So, that's the bedroom."

Eddie threw him a look. "That's where we're going, yes."

"And there's a bed."

"Yeah."

"But did you get it on with the wife in there?"

Eddie, who'd been distracted by thoughts of Richie in his bed for the

better part of the last two days, turned his head to glare at him. “Seriously?”

“No, really, how’d that work?” Richie swept across the room and threw himself on the bed, dragging Eddie by the wrist to fall on top of him. “Was it like— *Oh, Edward, take me now!* I need—”

Eddie kissed him, muffling him out, and his forehead smacked against Richie’s glasses.

“Why are you doing that stupid accent?”

“Can’t remember,” Richie muttered. He ran his hands over Eddie’s arms, his shoulders, down his back to grasp at his hips. “Kiss me again.”

“I guess—” Eddie began to say, and Richie tugged his face down pressing their lips together, and then they were laughing, breathless, as they kissed and kissed and kissed.

They woke up tangled together, which made it by far the best morning of Eddie’s life, and if that was kind of pathetic he was past caring. He had to go to work and Richie’s flight wasn’t until later, so Eddie drove them both into the city and they had time to relax during breakfast, sitting at a small table down in the back, where they could let their legs brush under the table without Richie getting paranoid about it.

Richie started texting him almost constantly from the moment he arrived to the airport through the whole weekend, sending Eddie half-hourly updates on the candy shops at Logan (*my teeth fell off just lookin @ this!!*) his father’s pecan pie (*4 out of 5 stars*) his dislike of pumpkin bread (*overrated*) and pictures of a creepy college mascot (*I KNOW RIGHT?*). Eddie checked his phone religiously and wrote back in between glaring at spreadsheets and models, smiling stupidly the entire time.

It was good, and then it wasn’t. Messages from Richie got rarer and

he only wrote back hours afterwards, short and to the point. Fall stretched into December and Eddie's mood worsened with it, getting gloomier as the days became shorter and the city filled with lights.

As a kid, Eddie had loved and dreaded the holidays. He'd feared the endless dark afternoons at home with his mother or visiting with one of his many aunts, but he cherished the feeling of belonging, being loved and well-cared for, snuggling under a blanket with a mug of hot chocolate as the streets filled with snow.

There was none of that now. He and Myra may have been miserable but at least they'd had each other; all Eddie had this year were an office Secret Santa and dodged invitations from Aunt Ada in Bangor, who'd probably spend the whole day looking at him sadly and sniffing to herself.

Jon from the office invited him over for Christmas lunch, and Eddie felt a bit embarrassed but accepted gratefully. Jon's wife, Emily, was pregnant and they kept very little alcohol in the house, so Eddie brought a fancy cake instead of a fancy bottle of liquor, and after lunch he made himself useful loading the dishwasher and trying his very best not to give away how hopeless he was in the kitchen.

He managed to get water all over his sleeve, and Emily laughed as she took away his jacket and gave him an old sweater to throw on.

"So, how are things going, really? Jon said you'd been looking pretty good. I see what he meant." She touched his arm, and Eddie took it as a compliment and didn't mention that before his separation he'd been looking more like a walking corpse.

Inevitably, he was asked if he was planning on dating again. Eddie shrugged.

"Been thinking about it." Really, the holidays had gotten to him. "But so far I only really... I kept it pretty casual. Bars and stuff."

"Okay but hypothetically," Jon began. "How do you feel about getting set up? I don't wanna ambush you, man, but just in case, to get you out there." When Eddie didn't say anything he went on, emboldened. "Emily's friend has a sister who—"

"Actually," Eddie said, firmly. He picked at the sleeve of his borrowed sweater. "Actually, I don't think I'll date women again."

He kept fiddling with the stupid sleeve, twisting the soft wools between his fingers.

"So, like, men," Jon said after a beat.

"Yeah."

"Oh." Eddie watched him metabolise the information. "Well, still—"

"That's not why—I mean, that's not why I got divorced. Would've happened anyway. It was... not really great."

"Yeah, no, I get it." He clapped Eddie on the shoulder. "Thanks for telling us, man."

He felt a warmth in his chest, spreading from his shoulder down to his whole core. When he breathed, it was lighter. "Sure," he said.

"Just checking, are you all right with being set up on dates with men?"

Eddie's laugh was sheer relief, melting a tension he hadn't known he was carrying inside of him. He smiled. "Sure, whatever. Why not."

Richie called him twice in January, once right after the new year and another time to say that he had a few dates lined up in the New York area.

"Maybe we could get coffee, if you can make it?"

"Coffee?" That seemed like an unnecessary euphemism considering where they'd left off.

Richie sighed in a burst of static. "Told you, it's crazy busy. I can't really get away for long."

“Oh.” Eddie thought about it. “Where are you staying? I could bring stuff to do, and—”

“I’m really no fun to be around.”

“All right,” Eddie said, after a pause.

“Only if you have time. Really, don’t worry about it if you’re busy.”

As if Eddie wasn’t used by now to making time for Richie. They made plans to meet up in the same café where they’d had breakfast last time, cosy and out of the way, and Richie got them the same table in the back. Eddie saw him and did a double take.

“Nice blazer,” he said, with genuine appreciation, and his voice came out maybe a bit throatier than he’d meant to.

Richie blinked, looking down to his own clothes then back at Eddie, and grinned. “Would I ruin it if I told you that I had no input in this whatsoever? My stylist picks the outfits.”

“Disappointing,” Eddie said dryly. He sat down and looked at Richie again, past the fresh shave and the nice clothes. He looked pinched and drawn, knee jumping under the table.

A flyer on the wall announced that happy hour was in full swing, so Eddie got himself a beer and watched with some bemusement as Richie actually stuck to his coffee suggestion.

“So, I was talking to the sound guys...” Richie said, and launched himself into a story that he insisted wasn’t exaggerated. He told Eddie the more colourful anecdotes from the last few weeks, including a close encounter with yet another college mascot, and complained about dinner with the crew. “I mean, they’re great, but they really love sushi, I love it too but not two nights in a row. I want a steak. I’m dreaming about it.”

“Tough,” said Eddie, who felt mildly uneasy at the thought of eating raw fish. “Hey, could I... would you like if I come see you? If you want.”

Richie waved it away. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, seriously, I want to. You can’t be that bad.”

That got him the theatrical glare he’d been expecting, but Richie still shrugged it off. “Seriously, it’s fine. I’m not sure I could take the risk — I mean, if you hate it, would I still get laid? Can’t risk that.”

The tone was light, but he slumped his shoulders as he said it, curling his fingers around the coffee cup in his hands.

“Are you...” Eddie trailed off.

“What?”

He watched Richie’s throat move as he took a long sip, choosing his words carefully. “You look a bit jumpy.”

Richie’s fingers drummed a jerky rhythm on the table. “Look, it’s just — I’m surrounded by people all the time and I don’t know them very well. You know. I get—”

“I get it.”

“—just... paranoia.”

“No, no, I got it. It’s fine.” He wondered, if he pressed his knee against Richie’s right now, if he would pull away.

Richie was still talking. “Also, there’s, like, three jokes about girlfriends in there, so that’d be weird. I mean, I’ve never seen a vagina in my life, obviously, so...”

“I don’t think you needed to say that so graphically.”

“Just driving home the point.”

Eddie snorted, leaning back in his chair. Very purposefully, brushed his ankle against Richie’s leg under the table, and was pleased when he didn’t move.

“Look, just look up the bit about cruise ships on Youtube, that’s actually pretty funny. And the student radio story, I swear that actually happened. And, uh, the salad bit, I’m actually pretty proud of

that one. Didn't come up with it, but I worked on it, and it's cool."

"Well, I'm glad you think your own joke is cool."

"Well, I'm glad you're being a bitch," Richie said. "I missed it."

Eddie swallowed. He looked down to his empty glass. "You can call, you know. Anytime."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Richie left shortly after, and Eddie watched his retreating back and tried not to think that he would have really liked to go with him, actually, had things been different. It wasn't even about his stupid crush, just wistfulness—he hated the way Richie had been carrying himself, eyes jumping around self-consciously, looking behind his shoulder.

Around him, the place had gotten busier. Eddie thought about going somewhere else, a bar maybe, getting his mind off things; but, in the end, he sighed and went to the counter to order himself dinner, alone.

In early February, Richie called to say he was flying over for a couple of days to take some meetings.

"They're putting me up in a hotel, you could stay over," he told Eddie over the phone. "Hey, how do you feel about the Lego movie?"

"Absolutely fucking not, thank you."

They ended up staying in instead. Eddie watched cooking shows on the hotel TV while Richie went out for dinner, and when he returned his eyes were bright and his face pleasantly flushed.

"Stuff went well?"

"Don't wanna jinx it." Richie threw himself on the bed next to Eddie

and mouthed, theatrically, *Yes!*

That Friday morning Richie flew to Virginia, and Eddie went into the office to find that Jon had indeed made true on his promise to set him up on a date. It was... fine; he *had* said he wanted to date, and he figured he owed it to himself to make an earnest effort, and ideally stop being ridiculous. He was still guiltily relieved when it didn't work out.

"All right, but why not?" Jon asked, Monday at lunch. "Give me something to work with. I thought Andy was cool."

"Andy was cool." He had perfect white teeth, a nice ass, and dressed very sharply. He was also boring as fuck. "Guess we just didn't have much in common. You know, when it just doesn't click." Eddie stabbed his salad with some prejudice. "And, really, a sports journalist? I can't date a sports journalist, c'mon."

"What do you have against... whatever." Jon shrugged and went back to his lunch, probably already thinking about setting him up with some golf buddy or single former client, while Eddie sat there and wondered about his brain's abilities to find ridiculous faults in others. Maybe he should make more of an effort next time, for the sake of his dignity.

There was a bit of Richie's stand-up that was all about making fun of ridiculous things couples did together, and Eddie found out about it because he got forwarded a link to the Youtube video from three separate people as Valentine's Day approached.

ah thats a classic, Richie replied, one of the few times Eddie could get him to reply promptly, *it makes single ppl feel better about themselves & gives couples all sort of ideas bout stupid romantic things they havent done yet.*

Eddie, who wasn't feeling any better about himself after watching a video of Richie on stage in his stylist-approved clothes, laughing and basking in the attention, slipped his phone back in his pocket and went back to his models.

A few days after he received a card to his home address, depicting a

very ugly flamingo and postmarked from Florida, and he turned it over in his hands with some surprise before seeing Richie's name scribbled in the bottom corner. Eddie traced the signature with the pad of his thumb, and slipped the card inside a drawer.

He went on a business trip to Chicago in March, and there must be something deeply wrong with his brain at this point because every time he thought about hotel rooms he thought about Richie, and that wasn't the best idea when he was staying next door to his direct supervisor. He considered snapping a picture of his room and sending it to Richie, as a joke, but then thought that it may be misinterpreted and, besides, he hadn't heard from Richie in about a week. It was ridiculous that it felt like an eternity.

Eddie flew back home to drizzling rain. He spent the weekend driving around Long Island like a restless maniac, and the week after making a detailed spreadsheet compiling meticulously all the details of car models he'd been looking at, even though he should really hold off on major purchases until the divorce was at least halfway settled.

Work was a disaster. His department was in the middle of negotiating a reinsurance contract, and by the middle of the next week Eddie found himself wishing idly that his supervisor would disappear to a desert island somewhere, so he could maybe apply for the position and deal with both of his problems in one fell swoop. By the next Monday, he was seriously entertaining murder. As soon as everything was wrapped up he took a half day and slept twelve hours straight, and when he woke up, dazed and sleep-stupid, he realised that he hadn't heard from Richie properly in nearly a month.

Eddie spent over an hour wording messages in his mind. In the end, he texted, *Hey*.

And then, twenty minutes later, worrying that maybe he'd been too casual. *You all right?*

Eddie had gotten used to long waits, so he did a double take when his phone blinked to life with Richie's reply nearly immediately. He swallowed slowly around the stupid butterflies in his chest.

Hey!!! Richie had written, and Eddie took note of the two y and

three exclamation marks. *im v good actually just wrapped everything up 2 days ago. chillin for a while.* And then, *been meaning to talk to you actually.*

Eddie licked his lips and tried to think of a reply, but his screen lit up again.

can I call you later?

Sure, Eddie typed, carefully. He wrote more, and deleted it. In the end he sent, *I'd like that.*

Except, it was Friday, and after work Eddie found himself dragged somewhere for dinner. Richie usually called him very late in the evenings, L.A. time and all, and Eddie was surprised when he left the restaurant to find two missed calls. He called back, tapping nervously with every ring, and when his call went to voicemail he honked at a cabbie in frustration.

Richie didn't pick up when he got home, or after he got out from the shower. He didn't pick up as Eddie made himself tea and curled up with his laptop on the couch, and Eddie was about to give everything up and go to bed when finally—*finally*—he got an incoming call.

“Shit,” Richie blurted out as soon as he picked up. “I’m sorry, left my phone at home. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Eddie said, as if he hadn’t been about to jump out of his skin three minutes ago. “Fun night out?”

“Yeah, awesome. I was babysitting.”

Eddie was suddenly overtaken by a vision of Richie teaching a small child to say *fuck*. “Come again?”

“Babysitting. For my sister. I came visit for a few days.”

“And she trusts you with—”

“Yeah, I’m awesome, all children love me. And I forgot my phone, I’m sorry about that. I kept feeling like I should remember your number, but obviously I don’t. Anyway,” he said. “Glad I could catch you. Uh— what’s new with you?”

There was pitifully little that was new in Eddie’s life, besides a couple of mediocre first dates he definitely wasn’t telling Richie about, so he just blurted out, “I wanna murder my supervisor.”

Richie whistled. “Kinky.”

“No, shut up, it’s not kinky, he’s a dumbass. His organisation skills? Non-existent. We end up running all over the place like headless chickens. Screaming headless chickens, and he’s the fucking tamer at the circus, except he sucks at it.”

“I don’t think they have chickens at the circus.”

“That’s really not the point, oh my god. Keep up.”

“Right, your murder plans, I’m all ears,” Richie said. “Go on, I’m listening.”

“No, I’m just thinking, if he died, I’d do his job so much better.”

“Fuck, I missed you.”

Eddie jolted up to his feet, feeling like a sudden jolt had just gone off through his nervous system. His laptop wavered dangerously on the couch cushion, and he shoved it back to safety.

“Sorry, that’s stupid,” Richie said, speaking very fast. “I’ve just been... I’m glad that’s done with. So I get to call you to talk about murder plans.”

Eddie made a sympathetic noise, standing there in the middle of his living room like an idiot.

“Sooo— wanna go on? I’m curious, what you’ve been fantasising—”

“What are we doing?”

He didn't mean to say it; it just slipped out. He spun around on his feet, looking across the empty room and feeling suddenly drained. On the other side, Richie had gone silent.

Eventually, quietly, he asked, "What do you mean?"

Eddie sighed. "You know what I meant."

"No, I don't, that's why I asked."

"Don't play stupid." He waited the time of a heartbeat, but Richie didn't say anything. Restless, he started pacing. "You call me in the middle of the night, you said you missed me— we've had like three conversations in two months and you said you missed me, it's fucking *midnight*—"

"Should I not have called?" Richie said, softly.

"What the— no, that's not what I said." *Shit*, he thought. He felt terrified suddenly that he'd ruined everything, and he couldn't fucking stop pacing; Richie must be hearing that over the phone. Shit.

"Listen, I'm sorry. Look, I've— it's been a busy week, I'm tired, I don't know what I'm saying. Forget it."

"But—"

"Forget it," Eddie said. "Please, let's just... talk about something else. I actually missed your stupid stories, so."

"You know, you could've called, too."

He stopped in his tracks. "What?"

"I always call you, you never call me." There was a very loud pause. "Shit, I didn't mean it, like— it's not like I *mind*," Richie said. "But if you're— upset about it, you could—"

"I'm not upset," Eddie said, immediately. "I'm really not upset. Look, can we talk about literally anything else?"

"Can I come over?"

Eddie startled. He breathed slowly through all the small noises in the distance, the rhythmic *plink* of small drops falling into the sink, the faint electric humming of the fridge making ice. It was pitch dark outside. The clock across the room read twelve after midnight.

“Sorry,” Richie said. “That was weird. It’s just, you said ‘what are we doing’ and I thought—”

“What do you mean ‘come over’?”

“Uh. I mean, to your house. I know it’s late, but—”

“You’re in Boston,” Eddie said, slowly.

“I don’t mind.”

“It’s a four hours drive.”

“Three hours at this time of night.” Richie said. “Wait up? I want to...”

He trailed off. Eddie shook his head, wishing it would clear his thoughts.

“This is fucking ridiculous.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I just thought—”

“Shut up, I’m thinking.”

Eddie closed his eyes and pictured Richie’s face, his stupid face and stupid fucking hair and felt like there was a hand squeezing inside his chest.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yes, all right, please. I’ll wait.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi! I can finally admit to my friend that I have this fic mostly drafted, so I'm pulling it officially out of the anon limbo. I'm *delighted* by the response, thank you so much!

You can (and should) find me on tumblr @[liesmyth](#)
because I need more people who share my new
burning obsession.

5. Chapter 5

Eddie paced in small angry circles in the living room until his head started to spin, or maybe that was just because he'd gotten too worked up to breathe properly. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water, then spent five minutes debating if he should maybe take a Klonopin to go with it.

In the end, he just cleaned the bathroom. He scrubbed the shower clean, mopped the floor and made sure the bathroom mirror shined. Then he decided that a shower would help him relax, and so he washed and cleaned the shower again.

Optimistically, he changed the sheets and remade the bed. Eddie told himself he wasn't being presumptuous; it was only polite that he should offer Richie a place to sleep after a long drive in the middle of the night. He took an extra pillow from the guest room and didn't change the sheets on any of the other beds in the house.

It was one forty-five when he finished, still plenty of time to go, and so Eddie decided to do the laundry. As with the oven, the finer functions of Eddie's washing machine eluded him, so he only washed his linen, underwear and casual clothes, and put his work clothes in a bag to be professionally cleaned. He brought the laundry bag to the car so he wouldn't forget in the morning, and then remembered that it was Friday night and he was all out of food, and wouldn't have anything to offer Richie when he'd arrive after driving half the night. He sat in the driving seat and started googling to find a place that was still open. It was two-thirteen.

In his ears he could hear Richie's words, over and over. *You never call me. I always call you.* Eddie wanted to tell Richie that he thought about him all the time, that he went through his days imagining what Richie would say, the way he always looked at him with those warm eyes and easy smile. He *wanted* to call Richie, it was just—

There was no good way to explain it, really. It sounded stupid even in Eddie's head. "I have codependency issues," he muttered to himself, trying it out. "I lived with my mother until I was twenty-four." Not that there was anything wrong with that unless your mother was

Sonia Kaspbrak and she wailed every time you spoke about moving out of Maine. She'd talked Eddie out of continuing university the first time, pursing her lips with distaste when Eddie her his acceptance letter, saying that she'd always known he'd leave her behind.

"I stayed married and miserable because I was afraid of being alone," Eddie told the Richie in his head, turning the keys in the ignition and starting up the car. "I feel like I've known you my whole life and we barely know each other. I was afraid I'd scare you away."

Imaginary-Richie looked at him with compassion, clearly wondering what this crazy man wanted from him. Eddie tried it again. "I know we barely know each other... It's crazy but—I know this is going to sound insane but I feel like... I didn't want to scare you away but I like you. A lot."

Most coffee shops in the area closed at midnight, but Eddie found a single solitary Dunkin with the lights on and tried to compose himself before entering. He got a coffee to go, two bacon egg and cheese sandwiches, and then a bagel on top of that because he couldn't decide what Richie would like better.

"I lived with my mother until I was twenty-four," he whispered to himself as he waited for his order under the bright neon lights, trying it out. "I get codependent. I feel like I've known you my entire life. I was afraid..."

"That'd be sixteen dollars and thirty-eight cents," the cashier said, jolting Eddie out of his reverie. "Dude, are you all right?"

Eddie's eyes narrowed at the cashier. He had rosacea and small round glasses and looked all of twenty years old. "Excuse me, did I fucking ask?"

"Whoah, dude. Live your life, I don't care."

As he left, Eddie threw a look at his phone. Two forty-two. Richie might be arriving soon; half an hour, maybe. Probably fucking speeding. Like he didn't know the statistics about driving at night.

Eddie, who knew all the statistics and was confident in his driving

skills, drove back home speeding like a maniac. He set out two plates on the kitchen counter, put the coffee cup and the crumpled paper bag next to one of the plates and took out a bottle of wine from the pantry. He poured himself another glass of water.

When his phone rang, Eddie jumped.

“I’m in front of your house,” Richie said. “Want to—”

Eddie all but ran to open the door.

Richie stood sheepishly in his driveway as he’d just walked out of Eddie’s craziest dream. He was squinting slightly behind his glasses, wearing a rumpled hoodie. His hair was a mess, and Eddie wanted desperately to kiss him.

“Told ya I could make it in three.” Richie shot him a lopsided grin. He raised his arm, showing Eddie a... “I got you coffee,” Richie said. “Since you had to stay up so late.”

Eddie couldn’t help it; he laughed. Richie blinked down at him, looking at Eddie with adorable confusion. “What?”

“I also got you coffee. It’s in the kitchen.”

Richie’s smile looked like it could brighten the whole house. “Well. I showed you mine, show me yours?”

“You’re not that funny.” Eddie smiled back, utterly charmed. “Come in?”

They sipped on their respective coffees in silence. Richie picked at the bagel, his fingers drumming against the counter. Eddie’s knee jerked erratically where he sat.

Some ten minutes into it, Richie cleared his throat. “So. I thought we should—”

“Talk? Yeah.”

“Yeah, right. So, I did miss you. Uh, a lot actually. And I’m sorry I disappeared but—”

“I lived with my mother until I was twenty-four,” Eddie blurted out.

“What?”

“I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that, but I didn’t want to. I had options. *She* was the one who didn’t want—I got into this great fucking graduate program, okay, and she looked right at me and said ‘but you like working at the car shop, Eddie’. She used to guilt-trip the shit out of me until I listened and started to believe I couldn’t make it alone.”

“That sounds... bad,” Richie said, carefully.

“Yeah, no shit. My wife was almost as bad, sometimes. She called me at the office every—she wanted me to call her all the time. But I wanted to call *you* when you were—I missed you too,” Eddie said. “Really, it’s embarrassing to admit how much I—I’m sorry I made you feel like I didn’t want to, uh. I should have called. Sorry. I get intense sometimes.”

“Well, I think it’s cute.”

“Shut up, I rehearsed this. Lemme finish.”

Richie snorted, nodding at Eddie and crossing his arms over his chest. Eddie licked his lips.

“I wanted to call you, but I thought... I didn’t want to cramp your style. And I didn’t want you to think—you know, I feel like I’ve known you for a lot longer than I have, and that’s probably because I’m, like, emotionally codependent, or whatever, and I didn’t want—”

“I got a job offer in New York.”

“*Shut up*, I told you—what?” Eddie asked. “You got a what in New York?”

“Job offer. Like, on a production.”

“Oh.”

“Cause you live in New York,” Richie said, helpfully. “I started

asking around ‘cause— you know, in case you’re afraid you’re coming on too strong, I went and found a job *all the way* in N—”

Eddie kissed him.

It was more like he jumped him, really. Richie was annoying tall, and all Eddie could do was tug down his neck and plant an uncoordinated smack on his stubbled chin, grabbing inelegantly until Richie got the hint and kissed him back with just as much messy enthusiasm. Their teeth smacked together painfully and Richie laughed, cupping Eddie’s face and placing a kiss to the corner of his lips.

“I missed this a lot,” Richie said, soft and earnest. Then he pulled back and grinned. “Are we gonna have sex in your kitchen again?”

Eddie swallowed. “I thought we were going to talk.”

“Yeah, me too. Honestly, I thought you’d think I was being a creep or something. I haven’t— I wasn’t going to accept the offer without telling you about it first.”

“You should,” Eddie said. “You know, I’m obsessed with you. I think about you all the time.” He grabbed Richie’s half-empty cup from his lax hand and laid it down gently on the counter. “I think about your stupid fucking smile every time I jerk off. Let’s go upstairs.”

It wasn’t even about sex, really. It was that he just couldn’t stop *touching* Richie, who wasn’t going anywhere, he was going to *move here*. His hands and his shoulders, his jeans-clad thighs, his warm back when he pushed up his shirt to feel Richie’s skin underneath. They kept touching as they stumbled up the stairs, all heavy footsteps and ridiculous laughter, as Eddie’s back knocked against the doorjamb, as he fell to his back on his fresh-smelling sheets.

He traced Richie’s lips with his thumb, brushed the back of his fingers down Richie’s cheek. Cradled the side of his face.

“So, just to be clear,” Eddie whispered. “You’re moving to New York?” He felt like he was buzzing, intoxicated, young in a way he couldn’t ever remember being. Richie hummed breathlessly into his chest.

“Yeah.”

“Because...” He couldn’t say it looking at Richie. He turned his face away, letting Richie kiss hotly into his neck. “Because I live here. You want to be with me.”

“Yeah.” Richie’s voice was rough. “I want— I want a lot of things with you.”

“So, like...” Eddie scrunched up his face. “Uh— exclusively?”

Richie’s mouth pulled away from sucking into Eddie’s throat, dark eyes staring intently in the dim light coming from the hallway.

Whatever he must have seen on Eddie’s face, he threw back his head and laughed.

“What?” Eddie said, defensively.

“Nothing, it’s just— you didn’t want to *'cramp my style'*? I feel like you have a really overblown picture of my sex life, dude.”

“Don’t call me ‘dude’ when we’re about to have sex.”

That only made Richie laugh harder. He pressed another kiss to the side of Eddie’s jaw. “Sorry, babe, keep telling me about all the things you thought I was getting up to. I’m very flattered.”

“I met you on Grindr!” Eddie said. “You travel all the time, excuse me for thinking—”

“A girl in every port?”

“I’m going to kick you in the shin,” Eddie said, running his palms over Richie’s back. “Take off your shirt.”

“No, really, keep thinking that, it’s a lot cooler than the truth.” And then, against Eddie’s lips. “You know you’re my favourite.”

“Well,” Eddie said, grouchily, watching Richie peel off his shirt. The bottom of it snagged in his glasses, making them slide dumbly down his face. “You’re my favourite, too.”

“Yeah?”

He reached out to Richie again, all that warm uncovered skin. He wanted to kiss him everywhere.

“My coworker kept trying to set me up on dates,” Eddie admitted. “It was a disaster.”

Richie’s lips curled into a smile. “Really?”

“Oh, don’t gloat. The last guy— *shit*—” Eddie twisted on the bed, grinding down on the mattress under Richie’s hips. “Last guy was a pharmacist, I can’t fucking— pharmacists creep me the hell out.” Richie was warm and solid above him, humming into his ear. Close like this, Eddie felt Richie’s twitching cock fill out against his thigh, Richie’s chest shaking with laughter.

“What’s wrong with—”

“I’m a hypochondriac, I would’ve *died*— this is not the *point*. Take off your pants and kiss me.”

When Eddie woke up, his mouth felt pasted with cotton balls and there was an unpleasant buzzing somewhere to his left. He ignored it resolutely and thought about Richie instead.

Richie was here, soft and asleep, and he wasn’t going *anywhere*— neither of them had anything to do for the whole day, and the mere thought filled Eddie with warm, unruly affection. He curled into Richie’s side and went back to sleep.

The buzzing started again. It was insufferable, an ugly note on an otherwise perfect morning, and soon Eddie came to hate it more than any other sound in the world. It was fucking ridiculous that Richie was managing to sleep through it just fine, and Eddie couldn’t.

He stumbled out of bed and nearly tripped over his discarded pants as he walked across the room to the dresser, eyes half-closed, still

holding out to the hope that after this he might go back to sleep. Who the hell was calling at this time on a Saturday, anyway?

He swiped over the green button and brought the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

There was a pause. Then, uncertainly, “Richie?”

Eddie felt like someone had dropped an icy bucket of water over his head. He pulled the phone away to stare at the screen, horrified.

“Sorry,” he managed. “He left his phone, I— I’ll get him to call you back.”

Shit. Eddie stumbled back to the bed, shaking Richie’s shoulder.

“Richie, hey. Wake up.”

“No,” Richie said. He turned on his side and went right back to sleep.

“I mean it, Rich wake the fuck up.” Eddie poked him between the ribs, sharply. Richie stirred.

“What the fuck’s your problem, man?”

Eddie cleared his throat. “Your mother called.”

He watched Richie blink adorably. “My moth—”

“And I picked it up, I’m really sorry, I thought it was mine. I said you forgot your phone and you were going to call her back.” And then, for emphasis. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Richie said, bleary. “I can deal with it. Lemme...”

“Sure.”

Eddie hightailed from the room as quickly as he could. He washed his face and brushed his teeth, and the whole time he tried not to think of how his own mother would’ve flipped her shit had some strange man answered her son’s phone at nine-thirty on a weekend, sounding sleep-dazed and freshly fucked. He winced at his face in the mirror.

When he re-emerged, he found Richie sitting on the bed, frowning at his phone.

“I am *really* sorry.”

Richie waved it off. “Told you, ‘t’s fine. She wanted to know where I fucked off to in her car.”

Eddie let out an incredulous laugh. “She didn’t know you took it?”

“I borrowed it, first of all, and she was sleeping. She’s retired, it’s not like she’s gonna need it Monday to go to work.”

“Good,” Eddie said. “Uh, are your folks...”

Richie pulled a face.

“Awkward. Like, it’s mostly me who’s awkward. They’re... a lot better about it now than they were when I was twenty, but we don’t talk about that.” He shrugged. “M’mom reads the fucking *Advocate* these days, we get along fine and we never talk about how I’ve never actually come out to them. It’s all fine.”

“I told her you forgot your phone.”

“You’re very smooth,” Richie agreed, smiling brightly. “Come here.” And Eddie was just hopeless to resist. He let Richie tug him over by his hand until he was sitting up on his knees splayed over Richie’s lap, just breathing against each other.

“m very glad I drove over here,” Richie said, quietly.

“Yeah, me too.” He trailed his fingers through Richie’s hair, aimlessly, just enjoying the closeness. “Hey, d’you want breakfast? I have— half of that bagel I bought you yesterday. And two frozen bacon egg sandwiches, they’re probably disgusting by now. And whatever’s left of your coffee sludge. Or we could go out, I need to go shopping for the week.”

Richie looked up at him, eyes bright. “Will you take me to Whole Foods?”

Eddie snorted at him and stood up. He went downstairs to clean up the stuff left in the kitchen, put the unopened wine bottle back in the pantry, and was making a shopping list on his phone when Richie emerged, feet bare and wearing Eddie's microfibre bathrobe.

"Don't make fun of me," he said, lifting up his hands. "But I actually don't have a change of clothes."

"You need me to get you something from your car?"

"No, I didn't bring anything," Richie said. "Just, like, my phone charger's in the car and that's it. So if you could spare a pair of boxers and, uh, a toothbrush. And socks."

"You didn't bring any—"

"It was a spur of the moment thing! My romcom moment, okay. I brought myself and you should be thankful."

"You should be thankful that I have a spare toothbrush," Eddie said, standing up. "D'you need a shirt too?"

Richie said that he actually could use one, too, and Eddie dug into his closet until he found an old shirt that'd always been a bit too wide for him, well worn and thin.

After Richie was dressed he insisted they should take his car since it would be easier to park, and Eddie agreed well enough until they were outside and he saw that the car in question was a bright green Aveo that physically hurt his eyes to look at.

"What?" Richie said.

"My neighbours are judging the fuck out of me right now."

If there was one activity Eddie and Myra had practised fondly together it was talking shit about their neighbours, and certainly Lucas next door didn't get to criticise anyone's tastes given how his own front yard looked, but that wouldn't stop him anyway. Eddie sighed and walked to the car. "Can I drive?"

In addition to being ugly, Richie's mother's car pulled to the left

when he drove too fast, and Eddie hated every minute of the experience.

“I can’t believe you drove from Boston in this,” he said. “You should get it checked—I *think* it’s just the tires but you never know. Do you what the statistics are for car accidents caused by uneven air pressure? Almost a third of all vehicles are being driven with—”

“I think a better question is, why do *you* know?”

“I literally get paid for it.” Eddie took the next turn very aggressively. “Do you wanna know your life expectancy based on demographic and lifestyle factors?”

“Now you’re just trying to turn me on.”

“We’re getting the car checked,” Eddie said firmly. “C’mon, we can eat something while we wait.”

Over breakfast, Eddie waited expectantly. He got a glass of orange juice and a sandwich and watched as Richie steadily demolished his eggs, taking his sweet time as if Eddie weren’t right there and just about dying.

“What?” Richie said, eventually, once Eddie had given up all pretences of not sharing shamelessly.

“You’re moving across the country for a job. Excuse me for being curious.”

Softly, Richie said, “You know I’m not really moving for the job.”

Eddie felt his face burn. “All right, but— when do you start? What is it? Where are you going to—”

“Uh, May. So, like, in two or three weeks. It’s a TV show—a writing job. The show just got a renewal order, so it’ll be at least a year.” He shrugged. “Mondays through Fridays, ten through seven. Pay’s not exceptional but it’s still pretty good.”

In the midst of all his unbridled happiness, Eddie began to feel a twinge of uncertainty. He picked at his food. “That seems kinda

different from your usual stuff.”

“Yeah, don’t flatter yourself,” Richie said, but he smiled as he said. “I’d been thinking about anyway, just laying low for a while.” He brightened up. “And it’s a pretty cool project. I know a couple of the guys already. It looks interesting.”

“I’m glad,” Eddie said, meaning it.

“Sure. I mean, we can’t all hate our jobs, that’ll get sad pretty fast.”

“I don’t hate my—*shut up.*”

“You wanted to murder your supervisor.”

“Yeah ‘cause he fucking deserves it!”

Richie laughed again. “All right. Listen should I go buy something to wear or are you fine with me stealing me more of your stuff for the whole weekend? I’m thinking, if you won’t get tired of me I could probably stay ‘til tomorrow evening or, like, really early Monday morning. My flight’s in the afternoon, I need to go back to L.A., sort stuff out.”

The idea of *going shopping for clothes* with *Richie* sounded— so overwhelmingly domestic. It hit Eddie like a fucking tidal wave, that this was something he got to have now, as often as he wanted. He had to grip the edge of the table to steady himself, as if afraid he’d get swept away.

“Uh,” Eddie said, eloquently. He looked at Richie again, wearing Eddie’s own stupid shirt with TURKEY TROT 2012 on it, and sitting calmly in a café ten minutes from Eddie’s house as he belonged wholly in his life. He swallowed. “Yeah, take whatever. I bet you’d go clothes shopping at Target anyway.”

Richie’s eyebrows shot up. “Was that supposed to be an insult?”

Eddie waved him off. Richie collected the check and insisted on paying for both, and it was nearly noon when they went to retrieve the car from the mechanic, who knew Eddie and was probably judging the ugly paint job as much as his neighbours must have.

"I told you it needed an alignment," Eddie noted with some satisfaction. "I *told you*—"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Richie said, turning into the road. "Hey, could you have done that yourself? Like, because you said you used to... I just think it'd be sexy."

Eddie huffed. "Yeah, fifteen years ago. I worked— it was a second-hand car dealer, and we did some repairs. I was mostly on the business side, but it was a small place." He shrugged with forced ease. The way Richie was looking at him felt— heated. "I could probably manage something, yeah."

"I'm picturing this and, in my head, it looks like the beginning of a porno." Richie threw him an interested look. "Did you ever fix cars without your shirt on?"

"Fuck, no. It was in Maine."

The car steered sharply to the left. "Shit!" Richie cursed. "Shit, sorry — don't insult my driving, please. You're from Maine?"

He sounded odd as he said it. Eddie turned to look out of the window, sour just at the memory of it. "Yeah, not really a great experience. Glad I'm out of there."

"Fuck Maine," Richie agreed emphatically. "Fucking sucks."

They drove without further incidents and made it to the grocery shop about two hours later than Eddie's usual Saturday run. By mid-afternoon, there was no question that they both wanted to go to sleep, but even tired as he was it took Eddie some minutes to recover from the jolt of nervous energy of having Richie next to him in his bed again. He woke up at eleven in the evening, groggy and out of sorts, and found Richie's eyes staring at him, a soft smile on his face.

"Hey," Eddie croaked. He stretched out his hand and laid it on Richie's thigh, just to remind himself he was really there.

They ate pizza on the couch watching a shitty movie, and it was wonderful. Eddie woke up on Sunday with vague lofty ideas, driving out to the bay and having some adolescent picnic or something just

as achingly silly, but in the end they just spent the day existing quietly in the same space, laughing under their breaths and having slow lazy sex that still somehow made Eddie feel like he should be buzzing out of his own skin.

The day after, Richie woke him up at an ungodly hour because he had to leave, and Eddie strode into the office in an unfalteringly good mood. Jack glared at him and Sania outrightly asked him if something had happened, but Eddie just smiled in a way he knew must be insufferable, and said that it just looked like a very beautiful Monday.

“It’s going to rain later,” Sania pointed out, because she just had to ruin everything. “Cc me on that dataset when you’re done with it, all right?”

And she walked back to her desk with the no-nonsense attitude of a woman who had never been in—infatuated.

Once Richie decided he was going to take the job, everything happened very fast. His idea of moving across the country was apparently just taking three suitcases and having half a dozen boxes shipped over, and he kept everything else in his house back in California exactly as it was.

Richie told Eddie on the phone that he already had a place in New York lined up to rent, an apartment not far from the studio where he’d be working. Richie getting his own place was the sensible, reasonable, adult thing to do, and Eddie tried to repress the needy part of him that missed Richie already and wanted him to be around every hour of every day. He’d given up pretending that what he felt about Richie was in any way normal, like he’d found a missing piece of himself he hadn’t known he’d lost, and it maybe should have worried him more than it did, but Eddie didn’t care.

Instead, he called Richie every day and texted him when he should be working, and when Richie’s boxes arrived at his new apartment he offered to help unpack.

The apartment was nice. Like, *really nice*. Eddie, who was pretty proud of his home décor and occasionally was invited to the houses

of colleagues far above his pay grade, looked around with frank appreciation.

“Uh, Rich,” his mouth said before he could reflect on whether it was a good idea to speak. “Do you have, like— an accountant? Budgeting? I thought you said you weren’t—”

He shut himself up and just gestured around to the apartment, and Richie laughed. It was the Genuinely Amused Richie Laugh, as opposed to the Sexy Laugh and the Infuriating Asshole Laugh, that Eddie also adored, and the Self Deprecating Laugh, which he could’ve done without most of the times.

“Yeah, no,” Richie said. “It’s fine. I’m not paying full price on it.”

Richie laughed at Eddie’s face as he explained he was renting from someone he knew in L.A. who’d bought the place three years ago and never really set foot in it since, and Richie was getting a discount on the rent because it would otherwise just sit around empty. Eddie had uncharitable thoughts about Hollywood hot-shots who blew their first paychecks on multi-million real estate purchases they’d have to get rid of in five years to fund their expensive cocaine tastes, but he kept them to himself. The apartment had marble counters in the kitchen and the building had access to a pool with a sauna, and Eddie wasn’t about to spoil a good thing.

They never got around unpacking all Richie’s stuff on that first afternoon, because Richie insisted that Eddie absolutely *must* see the bedroom in a voice that made Eddie laugh even as he was pushing him down to the covers.

Later that evening he watched Richie make dinner in his new kitchen as Eddie fished out the cutlery from whatever box he’d hidden it in. They had to go out to the store after dinner because it turned out Richie had packed no soap or cleaning supplies, no paper towels or baking paper or mop for the floors, and Eddie put together a shopping list and laughed the whole time.

In the next few days, he helped Richie arrange his new shelves and move around some of the furniture until they found a look for the living room that they liked, and at one point Richie mentioned

offhandedly that he would never be able to fill all the closet space.

"Y'know, since... with your commute and all. And I'm going to be working late. If you stayed over— that'd be nice."

Eddie turned on his side, laying his hand on Richie's cheek. "Do you ever feel like we're being... very reckless." *Rushed. Ridiculous.* He didn't care.

Richie's fingers closed around his wrist. "I know. It's been, what... four months? Two weeks? Are we counting the days we talked or the days we actually met face to face?" He kissed the palm of Eddie's hand. "I mean it, though. I mean, look at that, you could stash a whole dead body in there. Put your fancy suits into my closet, babe."

Richie was an idiot. Eddie brought over some of his stuff the next day and left with a box of Richie's stuff to bring to his house.

They spent most of that first week screwing around, in all possible meanings of the word. Eddie got Richie a lamplight with a big fancy bow on top, brought him to his favourite steak place and, over the weekend, they stayed at Eddie's house and went to the theatre again.

It turned out that Richie actually could cook, even if his range was pretty limited, and once he figured out how to work Eddie's big oven he put it to good use. They had beef roast eating at Eddie's living room table, which he hadn't used in months, and the whole time he caught himself staring at Richie like he needed to remind himself this was actually real.

Eddie's firm was big on corporate culture. They had employees' barbecues over the summer and about three different office holiday parties, an informal department lunch every third Friday of the month, and every once in a while Eddie's department head hosted big dinners at her house.

Over the years he'd met most of his colleagues' spouses at least a few times, and most of them had met Myra when they'd been married,

many more than once. After his separation, the topic of Eddie's personal life had come up a few times— tactfully, of course, but once they were out of the office a well-meaning colleague would eye Eddie's ring-less finger and ask how it was going.

Since Christmas, Eddie wasn't exactly hiding that he'd been dating men. He didn't advertise it either, because fuck that, but it had come up once or twice and he'd just— *said it*, because it got easier every time and because it felt good. Every time he said it and the worst reaction he got was a startled eyebrow raise, it was as if he could hear the voice of his much younger self in his mind, crowing victoriously, *look, mommy, there's nothing wrong with me!* Good for young Eddie, he figured, and so Eddie was out. Ish.

Three days after Richie moved officially to New York, Eddie skipped on drink night with his co-workers since he had much better plans lined up. Two days after that, when Jon approached him again about Justin Something, thirty-five and single, Eddie shrugged very smugly and said, “Don’t need to worry about it.”

“Really,” Jon said, although Eddie’s good mood had been insufferable for the past couple of weeks so he really should have put things together sudden.

And then Jon said, “So, what’s his name?”

“Rich—” Eddie started to say, then stopped, unsure if he should say it. “Uh. Richard.” Richie couldn’t have looked less like a Richard if he tried.

And then, of course, Jon got interested. In between manly slaps on the shoulder and office grumblings, he asked Eddie how they’d met, and what did Richie do? The usual, except that Eddie wasn’t about to admit he used Grindr to anyone who had to sit through any of his PowerPoint presentations, so he just told Jon that they’d met at a bar.

“He works in television.” That felt safer to admit to than the actual career Richie was sort of famous for. “We’re taking it slow,” Eddie lied shamelessly, so he could pretend like he didn’t want to jinx it and escape any further questions. “But it’s nice.”

It was better than nice, most of the times. Eddie had taken to staying over at Richie's at least half the week and Richie always came over during the weekends; they ran all their errands together and did stupid hipster tourist stuff around the city. They had slow tender sex that gradually replaced a lot of the frenzied rushed sex they'd been having back when it was still a novelty and not a habit, but not all of it, because there was something to be said for frenzied sex even when they had time to luxuriate in each other after.

It was pretty fantastic, and it took Eddie almost a month to find something that wasn't working.

Once Richie started his job, a week after his move, Eddie was surprised by how much time he actually spent working. Richie explained it to him: the writing team had to sketch out the season first thing, and things wouldn't always be that busy, but in the meantime he worked until eight or even nine in the evening, and sometimes during the weekends as well. They didn't even break for lunch, still working between one bite of take-out and the other, and by the end of the day they were mostly sick of each other and went their separate ways.

That started to change as the weeks went on, and productions kicked into gear. Richie's workload eased up a bit—he started coming home earlier, texting Eddie when he was still at the gym and asking what he wanted for dinner. And sometimes, after dinner, he went out. There were a couple of brunches and drink nights and a small party after all the new parts were cast, and every time Richie returned with colourful stories about the rest of the writing staff and impression of the cast members that would've been a lot funnier had Eddie known any of the people involved. He could have looked them up online, he figured, but he didn't.

It was completely out of the question that Richie would ever offer to take him along.

The thing was, Eddie was out, sort of, and definitely off the market, and Richie was neither of those things as far the rest of the world was concerned. Eddie had known this about Richie, but it had been one thing when they'd only seen each other once a month, and an entirely different matter when they slept in the same bed five nights a

week.

They went out on dates at least twice a week and Richie liked to play footsie under the table, but only if they were sitting in the back. He was all for shoving his hand down Eddie's pants in a dark half-deserted movie theatre but he wouldn't ever hold Eddie's hand if they were out in the city, even though it was New York and no one would give a fuck. It was just how Richie was, and Eddie hadn't minded it in theory, but being confronted with the reality of it was harder.

Eddie understood, of course. He felt for Richie, who obviously hated the entire situation. He wanted nothing more than for Richie to be as happy as he could possibly be, because he was a stupid, infuriating, *brilliant* smartass who made Eddie's dumb little heart explode just looking at him, but— sometimes a vile, self-absorbed part of Eddie's soul raised its ugly little head and whispered: *if you can do it, why can't he?*

After Myra had left, Jasmine, who taught yoga at Eddie's gym, had suggested he should try therapy. Eddie, who'd spent his life going to more specialist appointments than any man should and had narrowly avoided an addiction to benzos half a decade ago, had absolutely no intention of going. But he still spent a lot of time overthinking his entire existence, from his creepy fucked-up upbringing with his bigoted mother to his creepy needy marriage based on mutual hysteria and compulsory heterosexuality, and how despite it all he'd made it far enough to live a life he actually enjoyed.

And then he looked at Richie, who was smart and successful and annoyingly charismatic, and probably made stale jokes about tits to his new television friends, and for the life of him Eddie just couldn't *fathom* why he felt like he should. Eddie wasn't going to force his hand, but at some point in the last month he'd gone to not minding it to feeling like a dirty secret.

The first time he tried to broach the topic, Richie said he didn't want to talk about it.

"You know, you sound like my manager. He was on this kick a couple years ago— he kept sending me polls and links to op-eds and fucking *blind items*, and sometimes when he's feeling vengeful he still calls me

up and talks about getting my publicist to put together a coming-out narrative ‘just in case, Rich, you know how it is.’”

“Wait, what’s a ‘blind item’?”

“Not the point. Look you think I don’t know it’s irrational? I don’t know...” Richie’s hands twisted uselessly, and Eddie just wanted to hold him. “I don’t know why I’m so scared, okay, I just am. You can take it, or— that’s the door.”

“Holy shit, you’re so fucking melodramatic,” Eddie said, stunned. “How do you even *function*? How’d you even—”

They were both worked up, trembling with nerves, so he pushed Richie own by the shoulders to sit him down on the couch and climbed over him, slapping his hand away when he tried to touch because he didn’t get to say ‘that’s the door’ and then grope Eddie’s ass two minutes later. He bit Richie’s lip, a reminder, and jerked him off without even taking his pants off so he’d have to think about this when he was doing the laundry. He kissed him until he was so breathless he couldn’t *think*, and then let Richie flip them over and suck him off slowly with his hips on the couch until Eddie was bursting with the need to come but he wouldn’t let him, the fucker.

“Besides, you know,” Richie said, after. “My sister knows I’m, uh. Seeing someone.”

Eddie brightened up. “Oh? Which one?”

“Sarah. She guessed.”

Richie had two sisters, both of them older. They got along though they didn’t see each other often, and Richie had once said that they were closer now than they had when they’d all lived in the same house.

“I was kind of annoying to be around all the time as a kid,” he said, and that got Eddie to elbow him lightly in the ribs and say that he was really annoying to be around all the time *now*, thank you very much.

Beyond that, Richie didn’t really talk about his childhood, which

suitied Eddie just fine since he didn't want to talk about his either, and Richie certainly wasn't bringing him home any time soon. Eddie knew the broad strokes of Richie's background— that he liked being an uncle, he spoke to his parents on the phone a couple of times a month, and he'd never actually told anyone in his family that he was gay.

"It was just... Sarah, it's always her, she nudged me and said 'hey, that one, isn't he hot?' and I wanted to *die* right there. I mean I was twenty-eight and never showed interest in a woman so by that point even my great-aunt Elfreda had made her peace with it, but it's the principle of the thing."

Eddie blinked. "Please tell me you don't actually have a great-aunt named Elfreda."

"I mean, no," Richie said. "She's dead now, god rest her soul. But she existed and yes, that was her name. Told you, my dad's family was terrible with names. I'm so glad I got stuck with Richard."

Eddie wondered briefly what Richie would've said if he'd known that the three of Eddie's co-workers who were vaguely aware of his existence thought that he went by Richard. It was all Eddie's own damn fault because that first time he'd panicked and worried that saying 'Richie' would give away 'closeted entertainer, Richie Tozier' and so now he was stuck with it and there was no taking it back.

Just last Monday, Sania had asked, 'So, Eddie, did you and Richard go upstate for the weekend?' right before she'd dumped a horrible new project into his email, and Eddie had given an embarrassed half-smile and told Sania that yes, they had, and asked if she wanted the number of the hotel they'd stayed at. Because they were now apparently the kind of couple that booked romantic getaways now, and at least if they were in the middle of nowhere Richie didn't mind as much holding hands in public.

The rest of the time, being with Richie was easy as breathing.

Eddie rolled into Richie's kitchen early on a Wednesday morning,

half-dressed and late for work, to find him handing Eddie a wrapped sandwich.

“So you don’t have to stop for breakfast,” Richie mumbled, shrugging self consciously and Eddie looked at him and felt like the world had just skipped a spin on its axis. He looked at Richie and saw everything he could have possibly wanted. *That’s it*, he thought, with sudden razor-sharp clarity. *You’re it for me.*

Richie looked at him, really looked at him, and asked Eddie if he was maybe getting sick.

“Your face’s all...”

“I’m fine,” Eddie said, feeling more than, and like his face must be in flames. “I’m fine, I’ll see you later.”

He kissed Richie and left the apartment whistling.

They’d been sharing their lives for less than two months and he wanted all of it already. Oversleeping on weekdays because the thought of skipping on the commute made him lazy, and it was nice to stay curled up in bed. Watching Richie use a spatula and a spare plate to flip an omelette because it was the only way he could do it, and Eddie laughed even though he really couldn’t even have gotten that far. Sitting on the couch with Richie’s hand in his own, listening to the steady sound of Richie’s heartbeat in his ear.

I feel like I’ve known you my whole life, Eddie had whispered to himself, over and over, and then kept it from Richie because it would be too embarrassing to admit even for him, but he still felt that deep in his bones. It felt natural that they should be like this, waking up spooning in the grey of early morning, stealing fries from each other’s plates at dinner. Richie sometimes looked at him like he couldn’t believe Eddie was real either, a small lovely frown etched on his forehead and eyes slightly stunned, and Eddie felt hot under his collar and had to fight the urge to grab Richie’s hand and drag him away somewhere they could be alone.

Sometimes he didn’t fight it. He stood up and asked for the check and tugged Richie’s hand all the way back home and to the bedroom, so

he could take his clothes off slowly and map every inch of Richie's body until he'd assured himself that he was real and here and *Eddie's*, until he could commit him to memory and never forget the way he made him feel.

Richie had a scar on his left shoulder that he said he'd gotten doing something stupid on a dare in college, and Eddie never asked what exactly happened. He was saving the story for a rainy day. Now he bent over Richie's body and pressed his lips over it, smiling against the skin.

He pulled back. Richie's long limbs under the dustings of dark hair were paler than one might have expected, made lighter under the harsh white lights of Richie's bedroom. Eddie traced two of his fingers down the side of Richie's arm, looked down where he was straddling him.

"Didn't you ever tan in California?" he asked idly, flexing his thighs and shifting back, enjoying the drag of Richie's cock against the cleft of his ass and watching Richie's eyes go dark. "Didn't you ever go swimming, or—"

Richie's fingers tightened around Eddie's hip. "We can't all— can't fucking be like you," he breathed, grinding up into the press of their bodies, solid and hard. He stared up with that appreciative look that made Eddie's skin flush and his body tense with arousal, thighs clenching where he was straddling Richie's dick, felt it twitching and damp against his heavy balls.

Eddie leaned back down to kiss Richie on the lips and laughed into his mouth at the hot feeling of Richie pawing at his ass. He slid off with some regret, because he liked the feeling of Richie's hands on his body, heavy and big, but he liked it even better when he got to look up at Richie's face as Eddie was touching him instead, kissing his chest and hip and the crease of his thigh, the way Richie nearly stopped breathing when Eddie's lips closed around the head of his cock.

Richie had a fascination with Eddie's mouth when he was sucking him off. He liked to trace Eddie's lips and dig his fingers into the corners of his stretched mouth, wet with saliva, pat his face so he

could feel his own cock through the thin warm flesh of Eddie's cheek.

"Shit you're so fucking— look at you," Richie whispered, reverently. Once, he'd grabbed his phone and snapped a picture Eddie sucking his cock, face flaming and mad with lust as soon as he'd realised what Richie was doing. He'd showed it to Eddie later, as he jerked him off, and Eddie had looked at it and *couldn't believe*— He'd made Richie delete it right after but sometimes he still thought about it, now that he knew what Richie saw when he stared at him like this.

He wanted to take a picture of Richie, right now, so he could always remember how he looked during sex— blotched red down to his chest and covered in sweat, cock arching over his stomach. Eddie pulled off when he felt him getting close, Richie's cock sliding out of his mouth with a wet sound, and jerked him off the rest of the way until Richie came in his hand with a choked sob. Eddie looked down at his palm, streaked white and smelling of jizz, and licked his lips; he wiped it off on Richie's hip and stared hungrily. There was something about the way that filth looked against Richie's flushed skin, the way Richie whined in his throat and blinked with glazed eyes, and Eddie looked at him and thought— he wanted to mess him up.

"Can I—" He wrapped his fist around his neglected dick, licked his dry lips as he looked down at Richie. "Please—"

"Yeah," Richie breathed. "Yes, fuck it, c'mon."

Sometimes, when Richie sucked him off, he let Eddie come on his face. He'd pull back with his eyes closed and his wet lips parted and Eddie looked at him and felt all the air leave his lungs, hit like a punch in the guts by the jerk of his orgasm and the filthy sight of Richie with white come streaking his cheeks. Eddie had to kiss him right after, couldn't fucking control himself, and the grosser it was the more he needed it— he wanted everything.

Other times it was on Richie's back, eyeing his stupid fucking shoulders and the dip of his spine, or over his ass as he thought about being inside of him. Now, he grasped Richie's hip as he gritted his teeth, holding as if to a lifeline, breathing roughly as he looked down into Richie's eyes and thought— *he's mine, I'm never letting him go.*

He came in a hot spurt all over Richie's spent cock— and it was obscene, really, and the best fucking thing Eddie had ever seen. He breathed, unsteady, wishing he had the words for all the things he wanted to say.

"We're gonna have to change the sheets," he said instead, breathless, because he was an idiot. Richie made a noise that sounded like he very much thought the same, and tugged Eddie's hand down to lie down in the middle of the sticky mess. It was Richie, though, so Eddie didn't really mind.

"You know, this is like... the most sex I've had in my life, ever," Richie mumbled. "I feel like my dick's gonna fall off."

"We can't have that." Eddie kissed Richie's ear. Then, curious. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Richie snorted. "Could've used you around when I had teenage stamina. Now I can't even get out of bed."

He was going to have to soon because he looked absolutely disgusting with Eddie's spunk drying off in flakes all over his chest. Eddie settled against him and thought that he liked the sight a lot.

"I wasn't really doing shit as a teenager, anyway," he said, idly. "Didn't have sex until I was twenty-two."

Richie laughed. "See, I was twenty-three. Took me forever to work up the nerve to walk into a gay bar without feeling like someone'd bash my head in. Uh, sorry." He made a face. "That's maybe too much? Anyway, I wasn't having sex but, man, I thought about it all the time. I was a horny little monster." He winked up at Eddie. "And now look at me, getting laid every day."

Then he stretched out on the bed, looking Eddie in the eyes, like he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary. "Course, I was totally making sex jokes back then. I had an improv group and we were so embarrassing— man, I'm so glad YouTube wasn't a thing."

"Richie," Eddie said, feeling helpless. He stroked Richie's cheek with the back of his fingers. "You know that..."

He studied Richie's face. "Did something happen?" He didn't mean to ask; the words just rushed out of their own accord. "You don't have to tell me, of course, just..."

He watched Richie's face carefully. Nerves, discomfort, confusion. He frowned, and Eddie thought it was genuine.

"No," Richie said. "Not that I can remember, it's just—I told you. Irrational." He shook his head. "Let's talk about something else—were you hot in college? I feel like that's a yes. Are you sure you never worked shirtless?"

Eddie let him have it. Richie would have thought that College Eddie was too straight-laced, probably, and he told him so. He wondered what Richie had looked like in college, or even younger. Eddie had a picture in his mind of a lanky mouthy boy of the entirely wrong age; he shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"Y'know, once I caught Ryan in Accounting watching your shit on his phone on lunch break."

"Yeah? You proud of me, baby?" Richie pinched Eddie's nose at that, probably to be a dick, and Eddie didn't tell him that he thought it was pretty damn cute. "You got turned on?"

"I mean, Ryan acted like I caught him watching porn," Eddie lied. "So I guess that tells you how embarrassing you are." Actually, Ryan had offered to show Eddie the video from the start and said it was pretty funny, and Eddie had no real reason to decline so he'd gone along with it. He had felt kind of turned on, but that was just because... "Hey, your tour wardrobe. Did they let you keep those clothes? Did you bring any of that stuff over here?"

"Nope," Richie said. "You'll have to take me shopping if you want me to dress cute." He batted his eyelashes up at Eddie. "My Pretty Woman moment."

Eddie laughed, and then kicked Richie in the shin until he agreed to get up to go shower. It was good like this; it was the best his life had ever been. He didn't care about anything else in the world as long as they were together.

Notes for the Chapter:

[narrator voice: But Would It Last??]

Thanks for the continued support guys. I'm absolutely floored :)

Author's Note:

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